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# IN THE OLD PALAZZO

A Novel.

BY

GERTRUDE FORDE

Author of  
“A LADY’S TOUR IN CORSICA,” &c.

*IN THREE VOLUMES.*

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IN THE OLD PALAZZO.



# IN THE OLD PALAZZO.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE MUSICIAN.

IT had been a lordly mansion once, long years ago—a few hundred more or less, what matters it in Rome?—furnished within with magnificence, rich without with decorative sculpture. Even now, dirty, neglected, and half ruinous as it was, its façade defaced, its courtyard defiled, the Palazzo Carborelli shewed stately in decay.

A wide marble staircase led up inside to indefinite heights, each floor apparently tenanted by one or more families; but the mezzo-piano and the ground floor bore upon the lintel of the door post one and the same name—that of “Bartolucci.”

Signora Bartolucci, or “Annunciata,” as

most of her lodgers called her, was a bustling active woman of a humble condition in life, and by no means above looking after her numerous tenants herself. These latter were not, as a rule, of aristocratic pretensions. In olden days, no doubt, the stairs had echoed to the martial tread of *il signor Duco*, or *l'illusterrissimo Principe* may have stared forth from the windows ; but now the rooms were chiefly occupied by men and women of artistic pursuits—beings who rose early and slept late, who lived frugally and paid the lightest of rents, and through those muffled doors might sometimes be heard flashes of brilliant music or rich song ; or, when they were by chance left a moment ajar, sometimes seen the gleam of a great half painted canvas, the vision of a ghostly lay-figure, or the gaudy hues of scarlet and purple robes.

Few of the apartments were more bare and cheerless than one—a long low room—situated on the mezzo-piano

The faded but once richly painted ceiling seemed to mock the incongruity of the scanty worn furniture—a narrow bedstead, half con-

cealed by a ragged screen, an oaken armoire and a washstand ; and at the other end of the room, a ricketty table and one or two arm-chairs, the carved wood of which was broken, and the deep-piled velvet frayed. The stove was not lit—it was too early in the year for that, though a scaldino might have been acceptable enough in the damp chilliness of this last day of November—and there was no lamp or light of any sort to relieve the gloom of the rapidly falling twilight. What was the use of a lamp to a blind man? And yet the solitary occupant of the dreary room sat, leaning back upon one of the crimson-cushioned window seats, his sightless eyes fixed upon the outside world with the intent look of one to whom that patch of deepening blue sky, that intricate mass of domes and spires and roofs, were things of present vision, not of past remembrance. Upon his knee lay a violin, across the strings of which the long nervous fingers of his left hand moved up and down caressingly, ever and anon (when unwittingly a quicker pressure made itself felt upon the instrument), wakening a half-

sounded note, that breathed like a distant wail across the empty space.

Presently came a burst of impish laughter, echoing from a neighbouring corridor, and the musician's hand paused, while a slow smile crept over his lips.

After that, a moment's silence. Then the sound of angry voices, a sudden rush of heavy feet along the passage, and the noise of a scuffle carried on to the very door of the room. Finally the same childish voice, before raised in merriment, now choking with passionate anger :

“Accidente !” it cried furiously, “io ti odio !”

But before another word could be uttered, the musician had laid aside his violin, and with quick, light steps had crossed the room and opened the door. One hand laid firmly upon the girl's quivering mouth, checked the torrent of anger rushing forth, whilst the other pulled her, still fiercely struggling, across the threshold, and shut to the door. Then Bernard Cortauld loosed his hold, and the slight figure fell sobbing in a frenzy of rage

upon the marble floor. He, meanwhile, returned as silently as he had come to his seat beside the window, once more taking his instrument upon his knee.

And presently, without heeding the child's sobs, he laid his bow across the strings ; and the twilight was filled with rich harmonies and dreamy cadences that seemed to speak with human words. For long he continued playing, his thin figure swaying back and forwards in a perfect fellowship with his violin, his worn face wearing more and more the wrapt look of absorption belonging to one whose spirit has fled away to unknown worlds upon the wings of music. And soon the childish crying died away, and she rose, coming gradually nearer and nearer as if fascinated, her small dark face, upon which the tears were scarcely dried, all aglow with an eager appreciation. Child as she was, she felt, as others feel, how directly the pulsations of the violin vibrate to these human hearts of ours. Yet the music of heaven is likened only to the playing of harps. The strings of the harp speak a message of

peace, of unalloyed sweetness—those of the violin of a passionate yearning. The former perhaps seem the fittest accompaniment of a life of perfect calm, unruffled neither by an uncertain future nor the memories of a painful past. But, so long as human beings still exist upon this earth, the most congenial sympathy of things inanimate will be found by many in the wild throbings of the violin, and the restless motion of the sea.

Night had fallen when at length the musician, with a sigh, laid aside his bow; and for a few moments there was silence in the room. Then the child crept a little closer, and half timidly laid her rough head upon his shoulder. He let it so lie for a minute; then put up his hand and abruptly raised the drooping face.

“Benedetta,” he asked, “who taught you to swear?”

A momentary silence—then a shame-faced answer in low tones :

“I am sorry, Maestro!”

“Who taught it you?” he repeated.

“I don’t know—Pippo perhaps. Forgive

me, Maestro.” She was trembling and drawing towards him again, like a chidden dog.

“What put you in such a passion?”

“Pippo was below in the court-yard, and I had my little watering-pot—I had just been watering my flowers, and I poured a little, just a few drops, upon his head for fun. It was nothing, Maestro, not a spoonful; but Pippo is so spiteful, and he looked up and called me an English cow. So then I was angry, and I threw down my pot at him, and—and it hit him on the head. And he yelled, and ran and told ’Nunciata, and ’Nunciata came upstairs running, and struck me two or three times. So then—and then——”

“Ah!” said the old man, “so then you cursed her?”

“’Nunciata always takes Pippo’s part against me, Maestro——”

“And Raffaelino takes yours against his brother. They are both her sons.”

The child was silent.

“Do you know what ‘accidente’ means, Detta?”

“No,” softly and hesitatingly.

“It means ‘may the great God let Annunziata’s body be killed suddenly in this world, and her soul lost in the next !’ Now, Piccola, you know. Will you say it again ?”

“No, never ! never again !”

His fingers began to stroke the dark rough head, “And what will you do to show you are sorry ?”

“I will beg ’Nunciata’s pardon. And I will ask Our Lady and all the Saints——”

“Peste !” cried the old man ; and Benedetta paused, startled.

“Who told you to pray to the Saints ?” he asked.

“Why, ’Nunciata——”

“Don’t pray to them, child ; pray to God. You are not a Romanist.”

Her eyes opened wide, and her lips quivered.

“But I don’t know anything about God, Maestro. Mayn’t I even pray to the Santissima Maria ?”

“What do you know about the Saints, child ?”

“Oh, a great deal. ’Nunciata has a lovely red

book full of them that she lends me to read sometimes; and Father Pietro tells me stories about them."

"So Father Pietro comes here, does he?"

"Oh yes, often. Sometimes to supper with 'Nunciata and Ino and me. When you are away at the Opera, you know."

There was a long pause, whilst the sightless eyes looked thoughtfully out into the land of retrospection and the child sat trying to read his face in the darkness.

"Are you angry, Maestro mio?" she asked at length timidly.

"No, Piccola, no." Then he gathered himself together and sat upright.

"How old are you, Benedetta?"

"Nearly twelve, Maestro, now—so 'Nunciata says.

"Nearly twelve! Who would have thought it!" he muttered to himself. "Ten years since Campbell died! It seems impossible! Detta," he continued abruptly, "you do not remember your father?"

"Oh no, Maestro; how could I? I was only a baby, you know, when he died."

“True. Did I ever tell you anything about him?”

“Only that he was an Englishman. But,” in a low, awe-struck tone, “’Nunciata says he was very beautiful—tall and fair——”

Cortauld sighed quickly. “As beautiful as one of his own statues,” he murmured, “and almost as fragile. He was a sculptor, Detta; did you know that?”

“Yes, yes. But tell me all about him. Why did he die?”

“He died,” replied her companion slowly, “of a broken heart. He had genius without perseverance or faith in himself; and genius at all times is a doubtful benefit to its possessor. He was too fitful, too erratic, too unknown to be successful, and too sensitive a man to push his way against adverse circumstances—one of the sort that shrink away at the first sign of neglect or misappreciation, and break their heart over the first cold or cruel word. Ah well! the world naturally holds in higher esteem that which it understands than that which is beyond its ken. For, mind you, genius may give birth to grand

ideas, but often it fails to develop them into living works. And the fame is reaped rather by the hand that executes than by the mind which conceives."

He was speaking absently, more to himself than to the girl beside him, but her eyes were fixed upon him with an earnestness which sat strangely upon the childish features.

She touched him lightly on the arm, and he started from his dreaming.

"Was the world cruel—to him?"

"Only by denying him that appreciation which was his due, until too late. But your mother was very dear to him. Had it not been for her death, he might perhaps have down-lived and over-mastered an unlucky fate. For she was his strength, his support; she at least believed in him with all her heart and soul. When you, my Poverina, however, were but little more than a year old, she died of a sudden virulent fever; and from that day poor Ned's hope, his very inspiration, seemed to desert him, and he faded slowly away. They called it decline—ah well! so it was; but it was the decline of a life from which the

sap has been drawn—just the withering-up of a nature never made to stand the wear and tear of a world full of suffering and disappointment.”

A sigh came bursting from the child’s lips—a sigh out of the depths of a heart too full to speak, and her small brown fingers clenched themselves as if in impotent desire to avenge the ill-used dead.

Cortauld put out his hand and softly touched her face.

“I wonder if you resemble him him ?” he muttered.

“Oh, no !” she exclaimed almost fiercely ; “He was beautiful, and good, and fair. I am black, and ugly—and bad !”

“I do not think you can be ugly,” mused the old man, drawing his hand across her face. “Your profile is straight and firm like his.”

“Ah ! but I have thick black hair, not lovely and golden, and great dark eyes——”

“Then you must be like your mother. She was a beautiful woman, Benedetta, and a noble one, although not one of the rich or well-born

of the earth. Your father was of a good race ; and long years ago, when he came to settle in Rome, left, I believe, grand relations who were angry enough at his choice of a profession. But your mother was the only daughter of a dear old mutual friend of ours, Benedetto Branconi by name. He kept a curiosity shop there at the corner of the Via Tre Fontani. He never sold much. He was more of a virtuoso than a merchant, and loved collecting relics rather than parting with them — a true artist, but not a man to make much money. It went to his heart to sell the bits of antiquities he had been at such pains to gather together, and I have known him hide away in a corner some pet trifle of vertu for fear anyone should take a fancy to it and want to buy it. He could give your mother little or nothing in the way of a dower, so it was but a ménage of love and lentils that your father had. But Olinta Branconi was a woman to brighten the darkest life and to make even poverty beautiful. Your father did wisely in his choice, though I doubt if those relations of his up in the north would have thought so.

But they probably never heard of his marriage, nor of your existence, my Piccola."

"I don't want them to hear of me," she whispered confidingly.

"Poor as they were, however, I doubt if ever a mother looked with greater joy upon the face of her babe than did yours; and, as it had been agreed upon that the child was to be named after her father, you were called Benedetta."

"Is my grandfather alive yet, Maestro?"

"O, no, child. He died years ago, in his little room, at the back of the curiosity shop. His collection has been sold, and Branconi's name removed from the door long since.

There was another short silence; then he spoke again; it seemed with something of an effort.

"Detta, sit up; I want to tell you more. Have you ever thought of leaving Italy and 'Nunciata?"

She began to tremble.

"Leaving Rome, Maestro? But you would come, too?"

"Do you love me then, Piccola?"

The little cramped-up figure suddenly slid down upon the floor, and bending low, laid its lips upon his feet.

“That much, Maestro! O, much, much more than that!”

“Come back, Detta; give me your attention. When your father died, his works were all sold, and they realized a fair sum of money. For, with the cruel irony of fate, so frequent in this world, men’s tongues began lustily to praise the dead artist whose grave had been first dug by their contempt. Had you been penniless, little one, you would always have had a roof to shelter you, if nothing more—for that I promised your father upon his death-bed, and you would have been welcome for his sake. For, from the first day I saw him, I loved him—in the years when I, too, had eyes to see life’s clouds and sunshine, as well as to hear its harmonies and discords.”

He paused a moment.

“But after that sale, you were by no means penniless. ‘Nunciata, who, as you know, had been your mother’s servant, was glad to stop

on and take, as best she could, a mother's place towards you ; and she has done her duty faithfully, for she is an honest soul, though sometimes rough. But the sum of money is almost untouched, for you have cost, as yet, little or nothing ; a child like you, content with simple fare, and I fear," and he touched the coarse material of her dress doubtfully, "almost in rags. But I must do my duty towards you, Piccola. You must not be allowed to grow up ragged, and untaught and wild ; you must go to school, and be civilized, and learn to know something of your own people and language. Are you aware that you are an English-woman, my Detta ? "

" No, no ! " she exclaimed, breathlessly.  
" I am Italian—Roman ! "

" But your father was English."

She was silent.

" And before his death, he told me his wishes concerning you. He had changed his mind then, and was sorry, he said, for your sake, that he had so cut himself off from his relations. They were not really hard or unjust,

he thought. He had been impulsive and self-opiniated as a youth, and in too great a hurry to resent interference and to shake himself free from control. It was, perhaps, natural that they should have treated his artistic schemes but coldly, and he admitted that the many years of estrangement that had since ensued, were due chiefly to his own proud spirit, which shrank from reconciliation with those whom he felt, with bitter humiliation, might point to his unsuccessful career as the fulfilment of their own predictions. But, under the shadow of death, pride is apt to melt away, and family bonds to renew their force ; and your father, Detta, began to think more of your welfare and less of his own independence. Old associations began to press upon him ; he began to regret the ties he had flung away ; and I think his heart yearned after his old home, and his childhood's days. ‘ Do not let her grow up an Italian,’ he said to me, speaking of you. ‘ Some day, when she is bigger, send her to England, if you can. Write to my relations ; perhaps they will be good to my child for my

sake—it has been more my fault than theirs—I never could stand a word of interference.' But, Piccola, time flies fast, and the years have gone over our heads more quickly than I thought. You are growing up into a big girl, and we must fulfil your father's wishes. I must write to these relations of yours, whose addresses he gave me. Heaven grant that they are not all dead and buried! But we need not beg from them, at any rate as yet; there is money enough and plenty, of your own, to send you to school for many a long day, and teach you many things. And after that, if they do not want you, why then, Piccola, we shall have done as he wished, and you can but return to your old Maestro, to keep his home for him until he dies."

There was no answer, but he felt the heaving of the small bosom pressed against his own.

"So now, Detta, you must be brave and wish to go to England, will you not?"

"But you will come too, Maestro?"

"I cannot take you there, my child. How could a blind man? I must find someone to

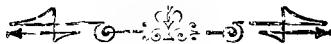
go with you. As for me, I shall, of course, remain in Rome."

A bitter cry rang through the long, empty room.

"I must go alone? Not without you, Maestro. Oh, not without you!"

"I thought my Piccola was brave?"

"But I love you, Maestro; I love you!" And flinging her arms around him, she burst forth into passionate weeping.



## CHAPTER II.

I WILL NEVER BE AN ENGLISH MEES !

TWO months had passed. A bright January sun was shining down on the stone-paved courtyard of the old Palazzo. An open arcade, supported by columns, ran round the yard, and beneath this, perched on a rough stone stool, sat Detta, swinging her feet impatiently, and paying but little attention to the piece of coarse knitting which had been placed in her hands.

Annunciata, a stout comely woman of the middle class, dressed after the fashion of her townspeople, hurried in and out through the various open doors, intent upon household cares, while Pippo was busily engaged in teasing two kittens at play in an adjacent corner of the courtyard.

“ When will Ino come ? Is it not near

noon?" asked Detta for the third or fourth time.

"Dio mio! Can she not tell by the height of the sun? I have no time to be always running to look at the clock," was Annunciata's somewhat impatient response; whilst Pippo paused in his whistling, remarking scornfully:

"Poverina! Can she not do without her sweetheart for a few minutes longer?"

Detta bent down, and, deliberately seizing upon the missile nearest to her hand, flung it at Pippo's head. He, knowing by experience that a bunch of uncooked onions is apt to be disagreeably hard, ducked adroitly, and at the same moment Annunciata darted out and arrested the girl's hand.

"Santa Maria!" she exclaimed; "dost thou think vegetables are bought merely to be knocked about here and there in thy silly fooling?"

But the next moment the scene changed, as a youth entered through the open doorway leading out into the street.

He was tall and slim, and moved with

that peculiar grace so common amongst Italians.

His features too were Italian in their classic beauty. Liquid southern eyes looked out from the low white forehead surrounded by clustering black curls, giving fire and expression to a face which otherwise, with its clear cut profile and finely moulded lips, might have been almost too statue-like.

At his coming Pippo ceased to tease the cats, whilst Detta flung down her knitting, and ran towards him with a joyful exclamation.

“I thought you would never be here,” she exclaimed; “it is so dull without you. Your mother will not let me go out by myself.”

“My mother is right,” said the boy gravely, putting his arm with familiar affection around her shoulders. “A little maid like you should not ramble about the streets of Rome alone.”

“Come then, quick,” she said, “and let us have dinner; then we will start at once for our walk.”

Raffaelino dived into the dark kitchen, and presently returned, bearing two basins of

steaming soup, which he placed upon a stone table at one end of the arcade.

“Here we are,” said he. “We will have our dinner out in the sun, Piccola, will we not?”

The soup was succeeded by a few vegetables, then by a plate of maccaroni, and accompanied by a bottle of the red country wine. It was a simple repast, soon over, but seemed quite sufficient to Benedetta Campbell, who was as yet inexperienced in the carnivorous appetites of her own people.

As they rose up to go, Annunciata’s sharp voice made itself heard from within.

“Ecco!” it said, “no dawdling about after Ino has gone; hearest thou, Detta? Thou must come straight home. There is no end of this English finery to be tried on thee, Saints help us! What is the use of it, *I* cannot see. To deck a child out like a duchess, in order to go to their country of England, where, so they tell me, the sun never shines, and where indeed it is daylight but half the year round. But there, the Maestro’s money burns a hole in his pocket!”

“Thou wilt strut about like a young parrot among thy new relations,” remarked Pippo teasingly. “Thou wilt be an English Mees then. But thou must not throw raw onions any more at people’s heads, or thy friends maybe, will turn thee out into the streets.”

“I will never be an English Mees!” cried the girl crimsoning.

“Oh yes, thou wilt,” pursued her tormentor; “thou wilt learn to talk that English, which sounds as if a man had swallowed his own tongue and were choking with it in his throat, and thou wilt become affected and mincing, and wilt say: ‘Oh, sho-king!’ and wilt walk like this!” And Pippo proceeded to give an illustration of his idea of the English feminine mode of progression.

Detta’s eyes were full of tears of mortification. But Pippo’s career across the courtyard was brought to an abrupt conclusion by the application of his brother’s foot to his person. He fell somewhat heavily upon the stone pavement, and picked himself up howling.

“*Ah Dio!*” exclaimed Annunciata, running

out, "when will you two have done quarrelling?" She glanced towards Benedetta. "*Altro!*" she said half to herself, "but it will not be a bad thing when the girl goes home to her own people, for it is about her most times that they find cause to fight."

"Come, Detta," said Raffaelino, holding out his hand, without noticing either his brother's bewailings or his mother's remarks.

But Detta, after a moment's pause, ran back and stuffed something into Pippo's hand.

"It is a caramel which Ino brought me," she whispered, "but I don't want it. Don't cry, Pippo. I am sorry he hurt you."

Then she ran on hastily, and putting her hand in Ino's, passed with him out of the courtyard. The old palazzo which was their home, was situated up one of the many side streets leading out of the Corso, and they were soon making their way down this latter thoroughfare. The narrow pavements overflowed, and the bright sunshine gleamed upon the merry crowds that jostled each other up and down in front of the long line of jewel shops.

A ragged, smiling boy stood at a corner playing a fiddle, surrounded by a circle of dancing children, a group of soldiers was marching briskly past, and a carriage full of tall Englishwomen with Baedeckers on their knees and glasses on their noses, was patiently trying at a snail's pace to make its way through the heedless pedestrians.

“Guarda!” cried the coachman, loudly cracking his whip, whilst the Englishwomen bent forward in evident surprise and some disgust to observe how slowly and carelessly these easy-going southerners moved out of the way. And Ino smiled slightly as he saw Detta glance towards the carriage and its occupants, and felt her grasp tighten upon his hand.

He knew well enough what was in the child's mind. She was still silent as they went up the steps leading to the Capitol, and passed onwards towards the Palatine, between the lines of those grand historic ruins which had their birth in the period of the greatest and the most corrupt magnificence the world has ever known, and which still speak even to the

prosaic nineteenth century with a romantic force claimed by few other ruins.

The sunshine lay golden upon the broken columns of the Forum, and fell upon the little lichens that hung from the great grey wall surrounding the Cæsar's palaces, ruthlessly displaying every rent and crack in the time-worn masonry, the architects of which had passed away into dust nearly two thousand years ago, leaving behind them no personal immortality, but only a record which should defy Time and point for ages with a silent finger to the pages of the past—to their story of crime, of luxury, of mad splendours, and of barbarous triumphs. On, under the great archway, gleaming white, down the hill towards the Coliseum, the red outlines of whose vast circle stood out against a cloudless sky—on, under the second archway, down the shady avenue, and out through the Porta San Sebastiano upon the high road.

Then at last the young man broke silence, using as he spoke the second person singular, so picturesque and pretty in the Italian tongue, but which sounds harsh and unnatural

to English ears, and therefore shall not be translated here.

“ Detta,” he said, “ do you know who is to take you to England next week ? ”

“ No,” she replied wistfully, looking up into his face.

“ I, Detta. What do you think of that ? ”

“ Oh, I am glad—so glad ! ”

“ The Maestro is very kind, Detta ; his generosity is almost too much. What do you think he said to me last night ? He called me into his room. ‘ Ino,’ he said, ‘ I want to have a talk with you ; ’ and then he asked me if I would take you to London. ‘ I am blind you know, Ino,’ said he ; ‘ I could not take care of the child or myself, and I have no one else to send. But I have money, a little sum that I do not want. I know I can trust her with you, Ino ; and if you like to go, there is enough for you to stop a few days after you have left her at her school, and to go about and see something of the wonders of our great English capital.’ Is it not good of him, my Piccola ? ” continued the boy, his eyes sparkling. “ London is full of sights, they say. I

shall go to all the picture galleries, and observe the English style of art."

"It is very nice for you," she said, a little sadly. "And before you go back, you will come again and see me once more, will you not, Ino?"

"That I will, Carina; but cheer up, little one, perhaps this English life may be better than you expect."

Benedetta clasped her hands with a gesture of despair. "I hate it all, Ino! I shall never be an English Mees. I feel as if my heart would break when I am so far away from Rome, and with no one to speak a word to me of my beautiful Italy!"

"We will not forget you, little one. You must write to us. The Maestro and I shall miss you sadly. But, who knows? Some day perhaps you will come over to see us, a grand young lady, dressed like those that we see every winter in our churches and galleries, but with the Piccola's heart beating as ever in your bosom. Ah, how pleased would the old Maestro be! Or perhaps, in a few years, when I am a great sculptor,

and have made for myself fame and name, I shall once more re-visit this rich, clever, foggy England of yours, and present myself to call upon the Mees Campbell, who was my Piccola in days gone by. But perhaps she will be too grand to know me then ! ”

She flung away his hand passionately.

“ Ino, Ino,” she said, with a sob in her voice, “ how can you taunt me so ! ”

“ I did not mean it, little one ; I know your goodness of heart,” and he stooped and kissed the quivering, childish features.

Raffaello Bartolucci was, as he had said, a sculptor, or rather hoped to become one. During the last year only he had been promoted from studio attendant to workman at the rooms of a Roman artist of position. He had however displayed considerable talent in his mode of executing one or two little bits of modelling of his own composition, and his master had been heard to express a favourable opinion as to his merits. The young man’s whole heart was in the profession, and nature had endowed him with the imaginative mind of the artist-creator. His somewhat

poetical disposition was of the kind that continually indulges in day-dreams far above and beyond its surroundings, whilst his manners and appearance had but little affinity with those of the class from which he was sprung. As he walked along now, the small head, with the clear-cut, refined profile, proudly thrown back, the slight young figure straight as a poplar—picturesquely dressed in his short velveteen jacket, a crimson sash around his waist, and the little jaunty cap set far back upon his clustering curls,—many an eye turned towards him approvingly in the crowded streets. For who appreciates the charm of personal beauty more than the Italian himself, accustomed as he is to the highest standard in every outline of both the nature and the art that surround him from childhood, as well as in the features of his own most beautiful race?

## CHAPTER III.

### GOOD-BYE TO ROME.

TIME is supposed to fly with rapidity prior to any dreaded event. But this is not always the case when the trouble looming before us is that of a severance from old ties, from a loved home. Every hour in such a case seems marked by the consciousness of some fact or sentiment which hitherto has passed us by unnoticed, and now for the first time strikes us, leaving upon mind and memory its indelible mark, simply because we are aware that it is the last time that a like sentiment will be experienced, or a like fact have part in our daily lives.

This was the case with Benedetta Campbell. Naturally a child of fervid temperament, the last week of her stay in Rome, crowded as it was with varying thought and emotion, seemed to her to comprise the incidents and

experience of any former year of her life, and to be of an unnatural length. Notwithstanding her strong high spirit and innate love of adventure, this visit to England appeared to her in the light of a forbidding dream; and she felt far more grief at leaving the land and the friends she loved so well, than excitement at the prospect of foreign scenes and so entire a change of life—refusing at first, with obstinate pertinacity, to look upon the new arrangement as anything more than a purely temporary one.

It was the afternoon of Benedetta's last day in the Eternal City. Her frugal dinner with the Maestro was just over, and the child sat on silently, finding it as difficult to relieve by words the sorrow that was weighing down her spirits, as, shortly before, she had found it to choke down her mid-day meal. Her dark eyes rested wistfully upon his face, and it was perhaps as well for Bernard Cortauld, whose heart was tender to a fault, that he could not see that pitiful look; or his resolution might have failed him as regarded the duty of sending his little companion to a foreign land.

“Detta,” he said holding out a hand towards her, “let us go for a last stroll together round the old place. We will visit all our favourite haunts, and you shall be the Maestro’s eyes as usual.”

In another minute or two they were walking, hand in hand, down the quiet street.

“Which way shall we go?” he enquired, as they paused at the entrance to the Corso. “To the Pincian hill? The band plays there to-day.”

“Yes,” she said absently. “Ah!” as a half sob caught in her throat, “and to the Castel St. Angelo afterwards.”

So they set forth, the blind man walking with firm tread and upright bearing, which showed many years’ acquaintance both with the difficulties of his infirmity and with the narrow paths and crowded ways of Rome; the child guiding his steps and making way for him with a tender anxiety that caught the attention of many a bystander. The bright sun was gleaming down on marble fountain and stone gateway as they passed through the Piazza del Popolo, and toiled up the steep

hill leading to the gardens of the Pincio, where, under the shelter of the withered and leafless trees, the band was breathing out softest strains upon the still, half-frosty air. Notwithstanding the cold, a line of carriages was drawn up in front of the performers; while a crowd of gaily dressed people of all ranks and nations, such as are better seen perhaps at such a time in Rome than in any other European capital, paced slowly to and fro.

The sunshine and the music had somewhat restored Detta's spirits; and, as they threaded their way in and out among the crowd, or paused to lean against the stone parapet in front, she began her usual commentary on the passers-by.

“The Principe is here to-day, Maestro, with his four-in-hand; do you not hear it passing now? And there is the Marchese della Robbia, seated as usual with his three pomeranians in the carriage beside him. And there goes the Signora Bertolini, who paints so beautifully, dressed in her crimson gown, with her hair all down her back; and, walking with her, is that strange Englishwoman who wears

a man's hat and jacket, and whom they say is so wild and odd. Ah! and here comes 'La Graziella,' who sings at the Opera; and there are two gentleman with her, I think belonging to the orchestra. She is nodding and smiling to us, Maestro;" and at this remark, the thin white hand of the Englishman, now violin player at the Roman Theatre, went up to his shabby hat, which he pulled off with an air combining an odd mixture of Italian grace and the old-fashioned courtliness of his boyhood's teaching.

"Maestro," she said suddenly, "turn round now and let the sunlight fall upon your face. The sunset is beginning to crimson the sky, and O, our city is so beautiful! San Pietro looks cold and grey rising out of the golden mist—you can only just see his dome—but the spires of the other churches gleam as if they were made of metal, and all the houses seem cut out in black paper, their outlines stand so sharp against the blood-red clouds."

"Go on," said Cortauld, as the child paused, for he loved to hear any one recall to his memory, however faintly, the charms of that

unrivalled city which had from youth been his ideal of solemn beauty and of grandeur, and which he worshipped with all the passionate enthusiasm of an artistic nature.

But there was no reply. Detta caught her breath with a suppressed sob, and her companion knew instinctively that she had laid her head down on the stone wall in front of them. He silently stroked the little hand that lay in his ; but not another word was spoken as they began descending the hill, where all was still bright and roseate ; then plunging into the grey gloom of the shadowed streets. They had a good walk before them ; but the feet of both man and child were well used to treading the rough, uneven streets, and were not easily tired.

When at length they stood upon the bridge, the sun had already set, and only a few pink gleams showed here and there in streaks between the tall grey houses. The river rolled by sullenly—that yellow, turbid Tiber which carries in its silent breast the memories of so many heroic deeds, and of the historic displays

of so many thousand years. In the centre of the bridge they paused and looked over. The old man listened to the sound of the swelling waters sadly enough; but the child soon raised her eyes towards the great angel which spread its dark wings so mystically overhead in the gathering twilight. For years that angel had been to Detta the object of a half superstitious love and reverence.

It had never seemed to her as a thing of art, conceived by the brain and carved out by the tool of mortal man; to her it always stood as the loving guardian of the city, keeping watch alike by silent night and noisy day, hovering above in the pure blue ether, untainted by the breath of sin and corruption which rose up beneath, and gazing with a calm pity and silent love upon every human unit inhabiting those high-storied houses in the many twisted streets.

She could not well have put her idea into words, but this was the sum and substance of it; and it is possibly one not unknown to other minds which have dwelt beneath the shadow of this poetic, old-world city. To

Detta this was the bitterest good-bye in all Rome ; and, as she lowered her eyes slowly from the outspread wings and clearly chiselled figure, once more moving onwards with her companion, they were full of unshed tears brought thither by that fanciful imagination which made it appear to her as if she were leaving her ethereal protector behind her.

It was nearly dark as they penetrated down one of the three streets leading towards the Piazza, and stood at length before San Pietro. The great square was almost deserted—on the road carriages had passed them driving swiftly and conveying freights of foreigners muffled up in shawls and cloaks, and holding hand kerchiefs to their mouths—and the moon, which had already risen, silvered the great grey dome, and laid the black shadows of the columns in dark bars across each wide arcade. Neither spoke much as they paced slowly round the silent fountain, and through the hollow-sounding colonnades, or sat for a few moments upon the broad flight of steps leading

up to the great cathedral, listening to the hushed voices of the city, as they made their way, softened by distance, into the deserted Piazza. Silent still, they returned at length through noisy street and crowded bye-way, past crumbling ruin and giant arch, back to the brilliantly-lit Corso and the darkened courtyard of the old Palazzo.

But, once again in his own apartment, Cortauld called the child towards him.

“ Detta,” he said, “ I am going to tell you about your relations and where they live. It is right you should know something about them before you leave us. They have not behaved unkindly to you. In future——” he paused, and his voice trembled a little——“ my Piccola must look to these relations as to her best and nearest friends, and will, I hope, not find it difficult to love them. You have, you know, little one, two aunts. Both have written to me expressing kindly interest in you. One, Lady Dumbarton, is a Scotch-woman, and your father’s half sister only. I fancy she must have been greatly his senior. The other, Mrs. Wilding, lives in England,

and was your father's own sister. It is she who has chosen the school for you. Both she and Lady Dumbarton invite you to spend part of your Midsummer holidays with them ; and Mrs. Wilding adds that she will be willing for you to pass every Christmas with herself and her family. She, Mrs. Wilding, writes kindly and affectionately of your father, and says had she heard of you sooner, she would have been glad to do what she could for her brother's child. So you see, after all, my Piccola, that you are not going lonely to a foreign land, but to kith and kin, who will, I hope, welcome you and soon love you for your own sake."

Benedetta tightened her hold upon him, but made no reply.

" I only hope," said the old man musingly, " that I have not been remiss in keeping you away so long from your own people. I was misled by poor Ned's prejudices. I thought it more than probable that they might refuse to recognise you ; but now all is well, Piccola. You must try and learn as fast as you can, and become less and less of a little savage, so

that when Midsummer comes, your aunts may not be ashamed of their brother's little girl."

Then, seeing still that the child made no response, he gently dropped her hand and took up his instrument. When, an hour later Raffaello came in, he was still playing. The lamp, placed upon the bare wood table, shed a dim light across the apartment, which fell upon the thin features of the player, illumined by the visionary smile which rarely failed to wake at the sound of his violin. It fell also upon a young figure, lying face downwards upon the uncarpeted floor, and still quivering with long-indulged sobs.

Raffaelino stooped over the little heap of childish sorrow, and lifting it up, placed it on the seat beside him

"Carissima," he whispered tenderly, "do not cry so. Do you not know how it will grieve the Maestro if he hears you?"

The child dried her eyes submissively, and made a strong effort to compose herself. When at length the last soft high chord had died away into space, the musician held out his hand towards her, and she rose, and,

coming to him, laid her head upon his shoulder.

“Thou wilt hear much beautiful music in England, my Piccola,” he said. “The common people do not love it and take part in it as they do here in song-loving Italy; but every great artiste comes to the huge rich city of London, where there are always so many people to appreciate talent, and willing to pay for it.”

Benedetta heaved a long, deep sigh.

“I shall hear none like yours, Maestro.”

“Oh, yes, you will, little one; far better than mine.”

“It will not sound the same to me.” And here she nearly broke down again.

Cortauld put his arm around her.

“Poveretta!” he said tenderly, “do not fret. We shall see each other again some day, please God.”

“When I am grown up, Maestro, and have learnt all my lessons, then I may come back and live with you again?”

“Who knows? who knows?” he muttered vaguely to himself.

“ It is a long, long time,” she sighed.

“ It will seem to go by quicker after a bit,” he said.

But in his heart he felt how unlikely it was that Benedetta Campbell, after her five or six years’ English training, should ever return from her father’s country and relations to be his adopted child as of yore in the old Palazzo.



## CHAPTER IV.

“ ADDIO, MY PICCOLA ! ”

NEARLY a week had passed. Benedetta had now been several days at her English school. She found the time pass much more quickly than she had expected. The new life was so totally different from anything she had before experienced, and incident succeeded incident with such startling rapidity, that to one of her vivacious and intelligent disposition, little room was left for any feelings but those of interest and amazement, and she had as yet been almost too excited to give way to her anticipated homesickness.

Her schoolfellows, teachers, and the existence they led, were so many curious puzzles to her, while she was undoubtedly as great an enigma to them. As yet her companions had not fairly made up their minds whether to

like or dislike her. At present they were inclined to regard her with that half antipathetic wonder with which a wild bird might be expected to be greeted by the inmates of a cageful of tame canaries.

Her teachers were divided between the annoyance and perplexity caused by her want of civilisation, and a certain attraction that most of them felt for the wistful-eyed, original little creature. So far, Benedetta's scholastic career could scarcely be said to have been a success. She seemed to have employed herself in tumbling, so to speak, out of one scrape into another. She had already outraged the local proprieties on almost every point, and broken every rule in the establishment ; and it was only on account of her evident ignorance of all social laws, and owing to the excuse offered for her shortcomings by the difficulty of understanding her or making her understand, that she had not fallen into dire disgrace. The child knew a little English, which Bernard Cortauld had been at pains to teach her ; but it was of a very broken and inefficient kind, and could by no means carry

her through the requirements of the day. It was inadvisable, too, to encourage her as yet in its public display, she having already, on more than one occasion, convulsed the whole school by her peculiar accent and ridiculous choice of words.

This morning, for the first time, the little Italian, as the girls called her, had appeared in a new light, having been singled out for commendation. It was during the singing class, when Benedetta's full, clear tones and exact ear had contrasted favourably with the thin, reedy notes and false harmonies of many of her companions. On being questioned, too, she had proved herself, notwithstanding her broken English, to have a knowledge of the science of music, unusual at her age, and which utterly distanced her schoolfellows. The singing master's approbation, however, had not elated Detta as it probably would have done many of her companions. She was a child little affected as yet by praise or blame, except from those she loved. She had neither ambition nor conceit, and the lightest expressed wish of the Maestro or Raffaello

recurring to her memory, had more power to move her than the strongest opinions of those strangers now surrounding her.

It was now afternoon, and, notwithstanding being the month of February, bright and fairly warm. The girls were all assembled in the garden, previous to their afternoon walk, for which the presiding genius, one of the English governesses, had not as yet arrived. A little wooden verandah spread along one side of the house under the school-room windows ; and at this point, an animated scene, of which Benedetta was the central figure, was going on. The child, who was surrounded by a circle of her companions, was engaged in executing a Campagnan dance, perhaps of a more lively than decorous nature, accompanying it at the same time with snatches of a shrill canzonetta. Her schoolfellows were looking on, not quite sure whether to applaud or be scandalised, when suddenly she paused with a cry of delight, dashed through the circle, and flew across the lawn. She had seen a well-known figure coming down the drive, and was rushing

towards it. The next moment, the assembled schoolgirls saw her fling herself into the arms of a tall youth, hugging him, and almost crying with joy over him. Ino laughed and reddened a little, observing the many curious faces gazing towards them with undisguised amazement, as he took her hand, and together they walked down the drive.

"My Piccola is not a bit more staid as yet, I see," he remarked in his own tongue. "And yet, Detta, you look quite a young lady with that grand flounced dress, and your hair twisted up in the English style. You see, little one, I have kept my word, and come to say good-bye to you once more before I go."

She looked up tearfully into his face.

"Is it the last time, Ino? Do you leave to-morrow?"

"I return to-morrow. And so those are your schoolfellows, carina? They are pretty signorine, but they are inquisitive," and he blushed again slightly. For in Italy, youths of seventeen are sometimes possessed of their

share of modesty, and are not always case-hardened men of the world.

They were now approaching the front door; and at this moment, a carriage drove rapidly past, and drew up before them. Out of it stepped a stout, good-looking lady of some forty-five summers, who stared hard at the couple, as she entered the house.

“Must we go in?” enquired Detta, wistfully, seeing that her companion was about to follow.

“I must be polite to the esteemed lady, thy teacher,” said Raffaello; “and then I will request permission for thee to take a walk with me.”

Poor ignorant Ino and Detta! They little suspected with what astonishment such a proposal would be received, nor how impossible it was, according to the laws of the Medes and Persians, as held at Somerville Lawn, to permit one of its inmates, however juvenile, to be seen walking out with an acquaintance of the opposite sex.

When the pair entered the drawing-room,

still hand-in-hand, they found themselves in the presence of the stout, comely visitor, earnestly conversing with Miss Horton, the head of the establishment. The latter glanced up, and frowned a little at first in astonishment upon the foreign-looking young man. But no one, not even an elderly schoolmistress, could glance twice at the face of Raffaello Bartolucci, without succumbing to the fascination of its singular beauty. The innate grace, too, of his moments, struck both ladies, as he bowed low, unable to speak a word of English, but showing a faultless line of white teeth in the smile which was so full of a caressing courtesy. The conversation had to be carried on in French, which Raffaello spoke a little with a good accent, and Miss Horton fluently with a vile accent. But before it had commenced, the schoolmistress beckoned Detta towards her.

“This is your niece, Mrs. Wilding,” she said. “She is quite a little foreigner as yet.”

“And the young man?” asked Mrs. Wild-

ing, raising her eye-glasses with a good-humoured stare towards Ino.

“That is the—ahem!—young gentleman who brought her over—a friend or connection of the Mr. Cortauld who appears to have taken charge of her since her father’s death.”

But Benedetta, who had come forward unwillingly enough, now raised her large eyes towards the lady’s face, and joined in uninvited.

“That is Raffaello Bartolucci,” she said. “He is going back to Rome to-morrow, and he has come to say good-bye to me. Are you one of my aunts?” she ended abruptly.

Mrs. Wilding put her arm around the child’s waist. The straightforwardness of Detta’s manner, joined to the pretty pathetic sound of her stumbling English, touched her heart, which was not an unkindly one.

“Yes,” she said; “I am your aunt Fanny—Mrs. Wilding. Have you heard of me?”

“The Maestro told me about you,” said Benedetta solemnly. “He told me I had two aunts, both very good and kind.” And her

eyes sought those of the elder lady softly, as if to test the truth of this assertion.

“ Poor little waif !” muttered Mrs. Wilding compassionately, half to herself ; “ I wouldn’t trust much to the other aunt’s kindness, if I were you.”

From which it will be seen that the sentiments held by the two half-sisters to one another was not of a very cordial nature ; and that Mrs. Wilding was in the habit of expressing her opinion on the subject of Lady Dumbarton’s merits pretty freely.

She looked at Detta earnestly, and implanted a kiss upon the smooth cheek, her own features softening under the recollection of the brother that had been loved—once, long ago.

“ You have your father’s nose and mouth,” she said meditatively. “ The rest of your face is Italian—your mother’s, I suppose.” And she gave a little impatient sigh, as she dismissed her reminiscences and recalled the usual expression of careless good-humour to her face.

But Benedetta’s thoughts had returned to

Raffaello and the proposed walk. And bitter was her disappointment when she found that permission was to be denied, and that her parting with Ino must be at once.

Indeed the young man, perceiving that his *congé* was expected, and that by delaying his departure he was but prolonging Detta's distress, rose to go almost immediately upon the decision of the schoolmistress being made known to him.

“Good-bye, my Piccola,” he said, holding out his hand and leading the child to the window a few yards off; “what shall I tell the Maestro? That you will try to like England and learn your lessons well, for the sake of him and your dead father?”

“I will try, I will try, Ino,” she sobbed softly; “but, oh! it is very hard.”

“It will be better when I am gone,” he said. “You have a brave spirit, Piccola; you will fight it out and soon be happy. But if at any time you are in truth miserable, and want anything, write to Ino, and he will do what he can for you.”

“Ah! and you will tell me if the Maestro

is ill, or if he wants me back again?” she asked, clinging tightly to him.

“I will, Carina. Addio, Addio!”

It was hard for those who for years had wandered about together through the sunny ways of old Rome as brother and sister, to have to part thus before the inquisitive eyes of strangers. But Detta, at least, had forgotten the presence of spectators as she flung herself for the last time into Raffaellino’s arms.

She could not speak, for her tears choked her; but, as he bent his tall head, she pressed her fresh childish lips again and again to his cheek, while he whispered tenderly in her ear:

“Good-bye, good-bye, my Piccola—my little sweetheart!”

The next moment he had gently disengaged himself, and with a cloudy look in his soft Italian eyes, had drawn himself up before the two ladies, made a low bow to each, and with a graceful wave of his hand, had left the room. But as the door closed, Detta for the first time fully realised her forlorn position

as an orphaned stranger in a foreign land, and flinging herself down by the window seat, regardless both of schoolmistress and aunt, she burst into a paroxysm of sobs.

“Benedetta,” said Miss Horton, “leave off crying, and come here.”

The cool calm tone of authority fell upon the child’s excitement like the touch of ice, and she checked her sobs suddenly and proudly.

“Come here,” echoed Mrs. Wilding, “and dry your eyes, like a good child.”

Detta obeyed slowly and reluctantly.

“You must not be so miserable, my dear,” said her aunt, with a well-meant effort at consolation; “it is very sad to say good-bye to one’s friends, I know, but everyone will be very kind to you here, and you will soon be as happy as the day is long. And, you know, you are come to your own relations; those Italian people have not really anything to do with you. You must be English now, and try to remember that your father was a Campbell.”

Benedetta regarded her solemnly and sadly,

gathering with some difficulty the drift of her words.

"You do not ask me to forget Ino and the Maestro?" she enquired earnestly.

"Who is the Maestro?" returned her mystified aunt.

"He is the Signor Cortauld--my father's friend--my master and father."

"Ah, yes!" said Mrs. Wilding, "the fiddler poor Ned took a fancy to. I daresay he is a good sort of old fellow."

The colour mounted slowly into Benedetta's cheeks.

The tone was patent enough to her quick understanding, although she was not capable of appreciating the slighting nature of the words used.

"He is the great music man--the primo violino," she said; "there is none in Rome better than he is."

Mrs. Wilding smiled.

"And this boy, this Raffaello, what do you call him--what is he? The old man's son?"

"Ah, no. He is of Rome--a Bartolucci--he is 'Nunciata's son."

“ And who on earth is 'Nunciata ? ”

“ She was my nurse—she takes care of us, and cooks for the Maestro.”

“ Good heavens ! ” ejaculated Mrs. Wilding ; “ that elegant-looking young man ! And does he cook too ? ”

Detta gave her a glance of grave reproof. “ He is a sculptor,” she replied ; he will be a great artist—now he but works in a studio —”

“ And so you two have been brought up together ? ” enquired her aunt. “ Well, well, all that can be put straight now. Thank goodness, it’s a good many hundred miles from here to Rome. You must come and see us at Midsummer, Detta. Your cousin Eveleen will be very glad to see you, though she is several years older than you. By that time,” she concluded injudiciously, “ you will be quite an Englishwoman, I hope.”

A spark of fire leapt into Benedetta’s eyes. “ I will always be Italian,” she said impetuously. “ Sempre, sempre ! And I will *never* forget Roma, nor Raffaello ! ”

“ You forget yourself, Benedetta ! ” said the schoolmistress.

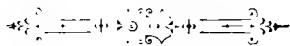
But Mrs. Wilding turned an amused face towards her.

“ A fiery little Roman ! ” she said good-humouredly. “ But it was just her father’s way. He had just the same high spirit.”

The child softened instantly.

“ Am I as my father ? ” she asked eagerly. “ Oh, I am happy ; I wish to be as him.”

Mrs. Wilding was touched, and held out her arms to her fatherless, motherless niece. Benedetta crept shyly into them ; and thus the first link—a slight one—was forged between the ‘ little foreigner ’ and her new relations.



## CHAPTER V.

### THE HONOURABLE BERESFORD.

CHRISTMAS was near at hand. There was a severe frost, and the trees surrounding Ashley Manor were bending under their weight of snow. The short December day was nearly over, and twilight was coming on. Within the house all was light, warmth and cheerfulness, pervaded by the bustle consequent on an arrival. There was, perhaps, no house in the county better furnished than the Manor—furnished with taste and convenience—all about it was snug and cosy, and, although neither imposing in size nor in the extent of its grounds, it was one of the prettiest little properties in that part of the country. The late owner, Mr. Wilding, had been a man of cultivation, a lover of ease and a dilettante in art, who had collected together pretty

things from all parts of the world, and lavished money freely upon the embellishment of his home. He had been accounted wealthy, but was more probably one of those men who, spending every penny of their means, and concerning themselves but little about those who come after them, manage to make a moderate income sufficient for their not immoderate wants. At any rate, upon his death, some fifteen years ago, Mrs. Wilding had found it necessary to retrench expenses to a considerable extent. Her town house had been given up, and she had also put down several horses, contenting herself with a pair of ponies and one old carriage horse for night work. But she had by no means relinquished her position as a woman of fashion, and, so soon as the period of mourning was over, had resumed her place in society, dining out and giving dinners as before ; subsequently, when a few years later, her daughter was introduced, taking her to all the county balls and gaieties of every description patronised by the upper ten. She had even managed, the first year or so, after Eveleen's presentation at Court, to

hire a little house for the London season, plunging the girl into the vortex of that period of dissipation, during which it was reported that she had been much admired ; but had discontinued this proceeding, finding it bear too heavily upon an income at all times strained to its utmost limits.

Eveleen Wilding was a pretty girl. At seven-and-twenty she was probably prettier than when, at seventeen, she made her courtesy before Royalty. She was fair, with light brown hair and blue eyes. A severe critic might have thought her features a trifle too sharp, but he could not have quarrelled with her complexion, which was lovely, nor with the daintiness of her short, slight figure. The habitual expression of her face was, like her mother's, one of good-humoured indifference mixed with a keen sparkle of fun. Yet there were times when it would light up with sympathetic animation, or, more rarely, relax into a momentary wistful sadness. She was always dressed in the height of the fashion, and with her good looks and bright, clever tongue, was a universal favourite, both in

general society and in the many county houses at which both she and her mother were in the habit of stopping. Many people wondered why, ere this, Eveleen Wilding had not made a good match with someone or other, and settled down into a home of her own. Some said that she was too particular, others that her rather sharp tongue frightened away intending suitors, and others again that she was waiting for her cousin, the Honorable Beresford Conway. Certainly Mr. Beresford Conway was an extremely eligible young man. The second son of an earl, with an independent fortune, an elegant appearance and fashionable manners, it was scarcely to be wondered at if society made much of him, and agreed in proclaiming him the *parti par excellēce* of the county — an opinion in which, malicious persons averred, he himself fully concurred. Be this as it may, there is no doubt that Mr. Conway had an extremely good opinion of himself. From childhood he had been told that he was handsome, clever and agreeable, whilst facts assured him that he was rich and well born. His elder brother, the future earl,

was a man of shallow understanding and infirm health. Beresford was neither, and from this cause it perhaps naturally resulted that both his friends and himself should over-rate his merits.

He was sociable, too, a good dancer, and (some people said) a good talker, a tidy shot and a fair fisherman—sufficiently athletic to be popular amongst the muscular youth of his generation, and sufficiently indifferent to ladies' society to be agreeable to all and pay particular attentions to none. He was a welcome visitor at most houses, but in none was he more frequently seen than at Ashley Manor. Mrs. Wilding had been his mother's first cousin, and on the strength of this relationship he made a sort of home of her house, assisting her at every social event, and usually spending his Christmas there. The present Countess of Courthope was not much to his taste. She was his step-mother — his own mother having died when he was a youth—and a woman of low extraction; and perceiving it impossible to get on with her, and consequently with the old earl, his father, Mr.

Conway found it more convenient to divide his life betwixt his club in town and his cousin's ever hospitable house. The outside world had for long imagined a tenderness between Beresford and Eveleen Wilding. They were mistaken however in their estimate of the feeling that existed between the two cousins. There was indeed strong regard on both sides, but no love-making either in the present or the past, and Mrs. Wilding, whose desire for the match was, said the uncharitable world, vulgarly patent, and who scarcely as yet realised the brotherly and sisterly sentiments entertained by the two, was beginning in despair to relinquish her long cherished hope.

In one of the pretty rooms upstairs, Miss Wilding now stood with her foot on the fender, talking eagerly to the new arrival.

“ You can’t think how glad I am to have you back for good and all, Detta,” she was saying. “ You will have to live with us altogether, you know, now that you have done with that tiresome school. We shan’t let Aunt Dumbarton get too much of you, I can tell you. I have wanted a companion all my life,

and now that I have got one in my old age, I shan't let her go in a hurry!"

"You are very nice to say so," said Detta gratefully.

"Let me look at you, child. You have grown much better-looking than you were last time I saw you. I flatter myself our foreign cousin will be something of a *county lion* this winter."

"And you," said Detta smiling, as the colour rose softly to her cheeks, "you are foolish as ever, *Eva carina*!"

"That's the very thing!" exclaimed her companion. "The little *souvenir* of a foreign accent puts the finishing touch to your fascinations, my dear Detta."

Benedetta gave an impatient movement.

"Do be sensible," she said. "Tell me who are coming here, and if you shall be very gay?"

"Gay, my dear? Yes, we are always gay after a fashion, in winter, or when there is any gaiety to be had. A few people are coming to dinner to-night, as I told you, and I have teased Mama into giving a regular dance after

Christmas. That is for your benefit. I want you to come out with a flourish of trumpets. You are young and pretty and half foreign. You must be beautifully dressed, and I shall tell everybody that you are an heiress, and that your mother was a Roman princess. Then you will have all the world at your feet, and can pick and choose the best man in the county at your pleasure."

"Why do you talk in that way, Eva? You know you don't mean to tell people lies."

"Oh, my dear child, don't be so frightfully pragmatical and prosaic."

"Well, then," continued Dettta, "you don't consider the best man in the county a necessity for my happiness?"

"As to that," remarked Eva, "I don't know that I consider man in any form an absolutely essential ingredient in the cup of domestic happiness. But goodness gracious! my dear Benedetta, you must not imbibe your ideas from me, a soured old spinster. With most people a good match is the *sine-qua-non* of bliss."

"You scarcely look like a soured old maid,"

said Detta, stroking the smooth braids of her companion's fair hair with a half maternal touch.

“Don't I? Well, perhaps not the typical old maid. She will soon be represented here by our dear friend, Miss Sparke. Aunt Dumbarton won't stir a step without her; and so—woe betide us! we've got to take them both in for Christmas. It will be a lively time, will it not, with aunt Dumbarton and her severe looks, and Miss Sparke and her little tracts? ‘Mark of the Beast,’ I call her. Beresford calls her the ‘Vital Spark of Heavenly light.’ She's anything but heavenly to my mind. But I shall manage to exist this winter, with you and Beresford to support me on either side. Mama will be the one to be pitied. Aunt Dumbarton has not yet found out that she is too old to be reformed, and lectures her unceasingly every moment she has her to herself. You don't know Beresford, do you, Detta ?”

“No, but I have heard of him.”

“Oh, of course,” said Eva carelessly; “every one has heard of Beresford Conway.”

“Is he so very celebrated?” asked Detta, whether serious or sarcastic Eveleen was uncertain.

“Celebrated? Well, every man of his sort is celebrated in the sense that all the people worth knowing know him, and all the others want to know him. He shall take you in to dinner to night, Miss Prim, and then you shall find out for yourself—if you have the knack of drawing him out—whether he cannot make himself very fairly agreeable. It is very good of me to relinquish him, for I find him much better company than Sir Peter Galloway, or any other of the country fogies coming this evening. Thank goodness Aunt Dumbarton doesn’t arrive with her Vital Sparke till to-morrow.”

“She has been kind to me,” remarked Detta, musingly. “I don’t like Miss Sparke; I think she is sly; but Lady Dumbarton is honest—though she is sometimes harsh, and very particular.”

“She has taken one of her solemn fancies to you, my dear. It is a great mercy, because, if you are clever, you may perhaps some day

cut out the ubiquitous Sparke,—to whom I have always expected her to leave her money, if it doesn't go to the Tract Society—and may at some future date wake up to find yourself a real heiress and possessor of some of those many thousands of hers now lying idle in Coutts' bank. I have long ago given up all hopes of getting a penny of it myself—though Mama does go on, with such heroic self-abnegation, putting up with the old wet blanket, for the sake of what she may do for me in her will—so you need not mind thinking of me. It would soothe my last moments, I verily believe, if I could see the Vital Sparke trotting out into the cold the day after Aunt Dumbar-ton's funeral."

Detta smiled; but there was a look of puzzled enquiry in her eyes as they rested upon her cousin, not unnoticed by the latter.

"My dear," she said, "you will have to grow used to me. I often say things out which other people keep in, but you mustn't, from that fact, deduce the assumption that I am particularly honest, or you will find your-

self at fault again. I am only honest when it amuses me or pleases me ; and can fib in society with the best of them, when I am in the mood."

Detta was silent. She was gazing thoughtfully into the fire, and made no response to her companion's light talk.

Eveleen presently jumped up. "There is a fuss in the hall now," she said. "It must be Beresford. He always brings about fifty-two packages, including portmanteaux, hat-boxes, and gun-cases. I must go down and give him his cup of tea, or I shall be in his bad graces. Good-bye, Detta I shall send Susan up to help you in half-an-hour. Mind you put on a becoming dress and be down in good time."

Detta remained seated before the fire, silently gazing into the red heart of the cheerful glow, for some time after her cousin had left her.

It was now six years since that winter when Benedetta Campbell, a little Roman maid, had landed with Raffaello Bartolucci on the English shores, which seemed to her as those of a foreign land. She had then been barely

twelve ; she was now eighteen. These six years had transformed her from a shy, half-peasant child, Italian in speech and manner, to a slim, fair-faced English girl, who yet bore many traces of the old Detta about her, and in whose soft dark eyes and coils of raven hair lay the unmistakeable tokens of her mother's nationality.

As a child, Benedetta had not been unattractive in appearance, but she had scarcely promised to bud forth into so sweet a specimen of womanhood.

It was not that she was strictly beautiful ; her features, although well-formed, were not without their minor defects ; but there was a nameless grace about her movements, a pretty dignity in her carriage, and an expression, half proud, half eager, upon her mobile young face that counted for even more than symmetry of outline in the sum of her personal attractions. She smiled now to herself as she sat musing over the fire, and her smile had the rich, full tenderness which floods a southern-featured countenance so much more readily and naturally than it does the more stiffly moulded

northern one. Her reflections seemed pleasant; and she was humming a little song merrily as she rose and began to make her preparations for the evening's gathering.

Eveleen meanwhile, downstairs, was pouring out the coffee and handing it to a tall man who lay lazily stretched out at his ease in one of the low easy chairs, his feet to the blaze.

“Well, what news, Beresford?” she enquired.

“Family or social?” demanded her cousin, speaking in the deliberate tone usual to him, and which some of his male companions unkindly termed a drawl.

“Oh, begin with the family, of course,” said Eveleen.

“Well,” said Beresford, sipping his coffee, “Fred is gone over to Rome—not the faith, but the city—for the winter.”

“What took him there?” asked Mrs Wilding.

Fred was the elder brother, the future earl.

“I think,” said Mr. Conway, “it must have been Miss Alicia Jones that took him there. She is come in for twenty thousand pounds,

and I fancy Fred thinks she would do for the future Lady Carleton. Or, perhaps it was that our respected stepmother has just added a couple of pugs to her stock in trade of pomeranian curs, and the pugs don't like Fred. So that he has got an excuse for absenting himself from the paternal roof for Christmas. But I don't know; it may be something else."

" You never do know anything, Beresford," said Eveleen; " according to your own account at least."

" A positive man is a nuisance," was the calm reply, " and it's underbred to know more than your neighbours choose to tell you. But I always know one thing, Eva; I know when I am comfortable."

" Which you are now?" inquired Mrs. Wilding with affectionate solicitude.

" It is always comfortable here," replied Mr. Conway with evident sincerity.

Mrs. Wilding gave a smile of gratified feeling at this announcement, whilst Eveleen exclaimed:

" You are wonderfully flattering to-night,

Beresford, and talkative too. I haven't heard you put together so many consecutive words for several years. But now for the social news?"

"Haven't got any," he replied. "People are being married, and born, and dying pretty much as usual, I suppose, but to no particular interest to anybody but themselves. It's your turn now."

"Well," said Eveleen, "I can give you one piece of bad news, and one of good. The bad is that Aunt Dumbarton and her precious companion have made up their minds to come here for Christmas; the good is that Benedetta Campbell has left school and will be with us too. You don't speak, Beresford. What are you thinking of?"

"I am thinking of Aunt Dumbarton," replied Mr. Conway. "She is a subject for reflection."

"She is a subject for bad language, I think," retorted Eva.

"It will be quite a happy family gathering. Cousin Fanny, I congratulate you."

"It is hard, is it not?" asked Mrs. Wilding

pathetically. "She sits upon me from morning till night, even in my own house. I shall never have a moment's peace while she is here."

"Yes," remarked Eva, "there is always something wanting correction. Either our heels are too high or our tuckers are too low; the housemaid is flippant, or the cook does not understand her sauces. Aunt Dumbarton's long nose can always sniff out something wrong."

"And so the Vital Sparke is coming," mused Mr. Conway. "She is a very terrible woman. You should have forewarned me, cousin Fanny; she is always trying to convert me, and I am not sure that she doesn't mean to marry me as well."

"I was afraid if I did forewarn you," laughed Mrs. Wilding, "that you wouldn't come, and Eveleen and I really could not have existed through the ordeal without some one pleasant in the house to keep our spirits up."

"Ah," said Mr. Conway, "selfishness is at the root of most of the actions of woman."

“There,” said Eveleen, “don’t moralize! You have not asked me yet about Benedetta. Don’t you want to know what she is like?”

“Not particularly,” with a yawn.

“Have you no curiosity about this half-foreign cousin?”

“I am never curious,” remarked Beresford; “it is too great an exertion.”

“I wonder,” observed Eveleen, laughing, “if you ever took an exertion, mental or physical, in your life?”

“Never when I could help it.”

“Ah, well,” said his cousin impatiently, “you men can be like that—at least when you have money; you have nothing to do but to sit still and float through life, and everybody thinks you charming.”

Mr. Conway smiled complacently. “There is no necessity, that I can see,” he remarked, “for women to be kicking up a fuss about every little thing, as they do. Excitement seems necessary to the female constitution. It’s fatal to mine.”

“As that’s the case,” remarked Eveleen, “I shall not give you an inventory of

Beneletta's charms, but leave you to find them out for yourself. That will be quite sufficient for your weak nerves."

"Let me know at once what is expected of me," he said, putting down his coffee cup. "Am I to succumb to this foreign young person?"

"You had better not be too sure of yourself in this case," remarked Eveleen; "it is quite possible that Detta may be the one girl in the world to resist *your* fascinations."

"Saving and excepting you," he returned calmly, watching with a languid interest the pretty little blush which flitted across his cousin's face. "It won't do, my dear Eveleen, it really won't. You must give up this match-making hobby of yours; I'm not a marrying man. Try Sir Peter Galloway now for your *protégée*."

"Sir Peter Galloway!" she exclaimed scornfully. "He has about as much brains as a rabbit, and cares for nothing but his stable and his dinner."

"Hush, hush, my dear Eva!" said her

mother. "There are many worse young fellows. He has no vices, and is well off; and every girl does not want a senior wrangler for her husband."

"Detta would'nt put up with a muff," remarked Eveleen.

"Besides," said her cousin, "Sir Peter is booked to you, Eva. He adopts—a—the complexion of a damask rose so soon as you enter the room."

"I never see any difference in his complexion," she retorted; "it is always that of a carrot."

Mrs. Wilding looked a little annoyed. She had made up her mind, that, if the Conway alliance proved abortive, the Galloway alliance would not be amiss. Why would Eva always set herself against everything tending to her own welfare?

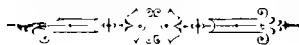
"You are never satisfied, Eva," she remarked. "Why must you pick holes in everybody? You will live to be an old maid, as I say."

"Very well, mama; it is highly probable. Certain, I may say, if Sir Peter is the alterna-

tive. The wife after Sir Peter's heart is his own cook."

"And I," remarked her cousin, "will be an old bachelor, Eveleen; and when we are both ancient enough to make it quite proper, I will come and join you, and we will keep house together. Don't look disturbed, cousin Fanny, we will take you in too. Or, better still, why don't you—a—marry Sir Peter yourself?"

From which it will be perceived that the Honourable Beresford, made much of everywhere, was more especially spoilt and permitted to take liberties by the ladies of Ashley Manor.



## CHAPTER VI.

### MY FOREIGN COUSIN.

WHEN, an hour later, Benedetta entered her aunt's drawing-room, she found it fairly filled with guests. There were elderly and middle-aged couples, with and without daughters, a bachelor clergyman, and a big young man of rubicund countenance who was laying down the law upon local matters in rather a loud voice.

There was also another man standing silently beside the mantel-piece, apparently divided between a calm admiration of the fit of his own evening pumps and an anxious desire to avoid the eye and conversation of his noisy neighbour. Eveleen touched this one gently on the arm.

“Here, Beresford,” she said, “go and talk to Detta. She knows nobody, and you can take her down to dinner. Detta, this is my

cousin, Mr. Beresford Conway—Miss Benedetta Campbell."

Detta glanced up and saw before her a muscular, well-made man, faultlessly dressed, his hair and moustache so fair as to be almost flaxen, and his blue-grey eyes expressive of a half-weary look, only partially relieved by a slight touch of humour perceptible at the corners of the mouth. Conway glanced down, and saw a tall, slight girl, of a graceful presence, whose fine eyes were regarding him with a critical scrutiny which was certainly not bold, but which somehow he felt to be a little unusual.

Detta's gaze however lasted only for a moment. She was disappointed in this cousin Beresford, of whom she had heard so much. The impression he made upon her was that of a somewhat conceited and languid person; and his height and good looks went for little in consequence.

There was a pause, for Mr. Conway, who acted upon the principle of usually shirking any social duty when there was a reasonable hope that others might be induced to under-

take it, was in the habit, as a rule successfully, of leaving the conversation to be started by a new acquaintance. Only on finding that Detta did not speak, did he rouse himself to make some opening remark. He remembered that Eveleen had told him her cousin was fresh from school ; and although Miss Campbell by no means bore the appearance of a bread-and-butter school-girl, yet he decided that her silence must be due to shyness.

“ You are new to these dissipations, I suppose ? ” he said, a tone of gentle patronage pervading his drawl.

“ Is this dissipation ? ” she asked. “ Yes, it is my first dinner-party.”

“ Well—ah,” said Conway, insensibly changing his tone “ You are right. It isn’t much of a festivity, is it ? ”

“ I don’t know,” she replied, “ as I never was at one before. But I daresay it depends a good deal on who takes you in.”

“ True,” he replied. “ I believe I am to have that honour. I am afraid you will find me—a—very dull.”

If he expected a polite disclaimer, he was

not disappointed ; and yet somehow it caused him to scrutinise his school-girl companion a little closer than he had yet cared to do, to see if it were possible she were making fun of him.

“ Eveleen told me,” she remarked gravely, “ that I should find you agreeable.”

“ My cousin Eveleen has, I fear, too flattering an estimate of my powers,” he replied after a pause.

“ But,” she continued, equally demurely, “ she also said you required drawing out.”

“ Very true,” he observed. “ Strangers don’t guess how bashful I am.”

“ Then I am afraid,” she said, “ we shall not get on well together, for I don’t know how to draw people out.”

She smiled as she spoke, a smile the origin of which perhaps was not too flattering to her neighbour. He, however, cared little for a school-girl’s gentle mockery, and only saw the sudden beauty with which it flooded the dark eyes and softened with bright warmth and colour every feature of the expressive face ; and for a moment he roused himself

from his usual nonchalance to say something polite.

“ *You* need never be at any pains to draw out your friends, Miss Campbell,” he observed ; “ the veriest hermit crab would come out of his shell if you smiled upon him.”

Benedetta made no reply, and the little word of flattery called up no blush to her smooth cheek.

‘ The Italian speech is flowery,’ said Mr. Conway to himself, unaccustomed to have his rare compliments received so calmly ; ‘ pretty speeches are, I suppose, a necessary part of every-day dialogue in the south.’

“ You are Italian, are you not, Miss Campbell ? ” he inquired presently.

“ My mother was a Roman.”

“ How delightful ! Roman society is very exclusive, is it not ? ”

“ I do not know. I was only twelve years old when I left my home. And my mother was the daughter of a shopkeeper.”

Conway glanced at her for a moment out of his languid eyes. Was this simplicity natural, or was it but the affectation of a

pretty sincerity adopted with an eye to effect? Whichever it were, the remark silenced him; and he felt believed that the announcement of dinner served as a convenient break in the conversation.

At dinner Mr. Conway again found it necessary to exert himself to an unusual degree, for his companion had less to say for herself than most young ladies of her age, and yet wore an air of intelligence that seemed intended to arouse him to a sense of his own responsibilities. She appeared also to be taking mental notes of all that went on around her, and he observed her gaze directed more than once across the table towards where her cousin sat beside Sir Peter Galloway.

“That is a fine young man, is it not?” remarked Beresford, glancing towards the latter and then letting his half-shut eyes revert to his companion.

“Fine? In what way?”

“Well—a—big, and stout, and red—plenty of him, you know.”

“I suppose,” she said dubiously, after a pause, “those might be considered recom-

mendations by some people, but it sounds as if you were talking of prize beef”

“ He is well off and a baronet—a prize, and rather beefy,” he said languidly. “ He is your cousin’s adorer, Miss Campbell. Don’t you think it would do ? ”

“ No, indeed ! ” she exclaimed. “ He is not half good enough for Eva.”

“ Poor Sir Peter, he admires her hugely.”

“ Everyone must admire her,” remarked Benedetta, “ she is so pretty and so clever and so kind. Do *you* think much of Sir Peter ? ”

“ I ? Well, he is not perhaps—a—exactly my idea of manly perfection.”

“ You can see,” she said, “ from her face, that Eva thinks nothing of him. Look at the mocking expression in her eyes. She is laughing at him all the time.”

“ I think,” said Conway, “ my cousin mocks at every man she knows.”

“ Oh ! no, she doesn’t. I never heard her mock at you.”

“ Indeed ? ” he inquired, with a feeble interest.

But in his heart he was sorry that she

should say it. He was so much accustomed to flattery from women of every age and rank that he was conscious of a faint wish that it had not proceeded from his companion's lips. It detracted somewhat from the unusual freshness of the impression she had made upon him that she should begin, like everybody else, to make much of him. Her next sentence, however, was not so politely worded, and took him a little aback.

"Scarcely ever," she amended, "and never unkindly. But then, perhaps, that is because we grow used to the failings of those we are much with."

"Ah! exactly," he returned drily. "In that case, if Eva married Sir Peter she would soon get over his little foibles."

Benedetta glanced at him in grave surprise.

"Why should you be so anxious to marry Eva?" she asked.

He gave an almost imperceptible start.

"I?" he repeated. "Anxious to marry my Cousin Eva to anyone? By no means! I find this house far too pleasant."

After which, finding she relapsed into

silence, he began to devote himself to his other neighbour, giving, however, an occasional side glance in the direction of the slim, white figure, and noting with undefined approbation the graceful pose of the little head, slightly bent forward as it was in an attitude attentively observant of the scene around her.

Dinner over and the gentlemen once more in the drawing-room, Conway paid no more attention to Miss Campbell, but gave himself up to his cousin Eva, turning over the pages of her music as she played, successfully cutting out Sir Peter in his somewhat heavy attempts at doing the agreeable, and later on, dropping with an air of innocent unconsciousness into the low chair beside Miss Wilding, towards which that gentleman was obviously making his way. He did not even offer the same attentions to Benedetta when she rose to comply with her aunt's request for a song. He was absently turning over the pages of a photograph album as the clear, full notes of her rich young voice swept through the room, and he was perhaps the only person

present that, at the close of the song, did not, murmur an enthusiastic word of thanks.

“ Well,” said Eveleen, when, an hour or two later, the company having all departed, and Benedetta retired to her room, she and her mother delayed for a moment, chatting over the drawing-room fire with Mr. Conway, “ and how did you two get on together at dinner ? ”

“ We took the usual number of courses, and we asked each other the usual number of fatiguing questions,” he returned; “ both being well-bred people.”

“ Don’t be tiresome, Beresford. Now, don’t you think Detta a charming girl, quite different from the common run ? ”

“ A little different, perhaps. She does not chatter unceasingly, nor yet keep unceasing silence, as is the case, one way or the other, with most school-girls.”

“ She is original, is she not ? ”

“ My dear Eva, don’t ask me to believe in originality. It is a delusion. It merely means affectation, or a forced effort of self-conscious wit. The only really ” (I am afraid Mr.

Conway pronounced it ‘weally’) “original person I ever knew was a man who never would take his umbrella with him on wet days for fear of wearing it out—and he has gone into a lunatic asylum. Unless,” he added reflectively, “one may count the case of another fellow I know, who is, I believe, sincerely fond of his mother in-law.”

“Really, Beresford,” laughed Mrs. Wilding, “you prophesy what our American friends call good times for me, in case Eva ever marries.”

“That question, you know, mamma,” said Eveleen, as her cousin held a spill to light her candle, “is already settled.”

Meanwhile, Benedetta was seated upstairs before her bedroom fire. She had taken from her trunk a letter which now lay in her lap, and, with her long black hair unbound and hanging over her shoulders, her warm dressing-gown folded closely round her, and her little feet thrust into fur slippers, sat gazing into the flames with an expression half smiling, half sad. Presently she took the letter up again and read it once more through. It

bore the Roman post-mark, but was written in English in a trembling hand, which ran unevenly up and down the page, making it sometimes difficult to decipher the words. Benedetta, however, nearly knew it off by heart, although it had only reached her three days before.

“Rome, December 15th.

“Mia carissima Piccola,—I wonder if you are *that* any longer? I fancy you to myself now a tall, well-grown English maiden, with, however, a warm corner of your heart filled with the remembrance of the Rome that was your home till six years ago. I can scarcely realise that it is indeed so long since you left us, and that my wild impulsive little Detta has probably become a staid accomplished young lady. It is a great pleasure to me, Piccola, to write to you in English. It is so many years since I had much to do with my own country and people, that it is a sort of refreshment to me to use words of intimacy in the old tongue—even when it is only written words. But you are wise, my child, to write to me in Italian, for though Ino has now

really a very fair smattering of English, yet I fear he would find it hard to make out for me a long letter written in the language. I know how glad you will be to hear how grandly Ino is getting on in his profession. He is a true artist, and has his whole heart and soul in his work, without which none can win success. He and I have long talks about you in leisure moments, and often wonder what sort of a young lady our little Detta has grown up into. We have been more than ever together since poor Annunciata's death, which Raffaello felt most keenly. Pippo too has really at last carried out his desire to emigrate, and set sail last Monday from Leghorn for Australia. My good Annunciata's successor does not wish for lodgers, so I am turning out of the old room, but not, I am glad to say, out of the old house. I am removing to one upon the top piano, where Ino too can be accommodated beside me. It will feel strange at first, but I shall no doubt soon grow used to it, and the only serious drawback will be the long flight of stairs, whenever one wants to taste the outside air. I have, how-

ever, been leading rather an idle life of it lately, not being so strong as I used to be, and for the last month have been obliged to give up my place in the orchestra. I hope, however to return to work soon; and they are ready to take me back at any time. I have one bit of news for you. There is a chance —a faint one—of Ino coming over to visit England again. Signor Pancratzi, his master, is talking of sending him on some commission to London. If that be the case, what a pleasure it will be to him to renew his acquaintance with his old friend Detta. I hope your relations will not object to his calling upon you. I know my Piccola will be glad to see her former companion, and hear news of the old Maestro who thinks so often of her. From your letters, my child, I know what a joy will be a whiff of the Roman air, and almost as great a pleasure will be to me the return news of old England.

Do not talk about coming back to me, child. Your place is amongst your English relations; and so long as you satisfy them and are happy amongst them, I shall be

well content. Ino, when he comes, will tell you some details which I need not put on paper, regarding the little sum still left to you from the sale of your father's pictures, and other matters which we have talked over together. We shall see each other again some day, please God; perhaps when my little Benedetta has married some fine English gentleman, and is passing through Italy on her wedding tour—who knows? Never, however, be persuaded to forget, that though your father was of English birth, yet that your mother was also a Roman of pure descent and of no unlearned family. *A riverderci* then; and that God may bless and preserve my Detta is the prayer of her loving old Maestro,

“ BERNARD CORTAULD.”

Benedetta gazed at the trembling signature for a few moments; then she raised the letter to her lips, and, with something of the old passionate ardour of her childish days, kissed it two, three times. Her eyes had filled with unshed tears as they passed over that part

which told of the musician's loss of strength, but they brightened with joy as they read of Ino's possible visit. Ah! it would indeed be delicious to talk over the old home and life with her former companion. After the Maestro, Ino had been dearer to her than any other in those childish days of happy, untaught freedom.



## CHAPTER VII.

### A SINCERE PERSON.

THE following afternoon the household at Ashley Manor was all agog with the arrival of Lady Dumbarton and her train. The train was not inconsiderable, consisting as it did of her companion, Miss Sparke, her maid and her toy terrier. Mrs. Wilding had been heard to say that, of this formidable quartette, each member was proportionately insufferable in the inverse ratio of his or her social importance. Her half-sister was troublesome and annoying, Miss Sparke still more so, the lady's maid worse, and the almost invisibly small dog most of all so. Notwithstanding much previous preparation, a full hour, spent by the members of the family in ceaselessly running up and down stairs at the behest of one or more of the four, had elapsed before

the new arrivals appeared to have settled down in their separate apartments with any satisfaction to themselves.

“I am sure,” murmured Mrs. Wilding to her daughter, as, her patience nearly exhausted, she descended at last to the drawing-room to ring for afternoon tea, “I have given up the best room in the house, the one which Beresford always has, to your aunt, and yet she is not satisfied. There has been a fire in it all yesterday as well as to-day, but she declares it is damp, and complains of the fog. *I don't make the fogs!* But your aunt always expects, when she comes into a hilly country in the middle of December, that she will find sunshine and an immaculate sky waiting for her. I suppose she orders her own weather in Yorkshire. I can't understand,” she continued, poking the fire with a vigour which appeared somewhat to relieve her feelings, “how these very good people, who are always snapping up their neighbours on the score of their neglected souls, should make such a precious fuss about the ease of their own persons. *I take care of myself because I like my com-*

forts, and I say so, and I don't talk humbug about 'perishing clay,' and 'vile bodies,' and such-like unpleasant nonsense. Yet even I don't make everyone miserable about me because the sky is one colour when I fancy it another, nor do I wear out Christian legs to hunt up a particular kind of biscuit to suit the palate of a nasty little snarling dog."

When, a few minutes later, Lady Dumbarton descended for her tea, the subject she selected for conversation was scarcely approached in a manner calculated to soothe the already irritated feelings of her hostess. The slight fog, or the fatigue of the journey, appeared to have put out the guest, whose temper, never very equable, was this evening decidedly aggravating. Perhaps nothing annoyed Mrs. Wilding more than to have her domestic or social arrangements called in question; and this her half-sister seemed determined to do after the most unsparing fashion.

"Are we going to have a quiet, Christian Christmas day this year?" enquired Lady Dumbarton, "or are you going to fill the house with a crowd of strangers? (Sparke,

Dandy wants to get up. Lift him on my knee."

"Yes, my lady.")

"We don't happen to be going to have any friends with us," replied Mrs. Wilding; "but I have yet to learn, Maria, that hospitality is unchristian."

"The season," remarked Lady Dumbarton, "is, as *I* understand it, a time for sacred thought, and not intended to be turned into a mad round of balls and dinner-parties."

"Oh, well, I certainly have asked a few people to meet you at dinner on Thursday. Have you any objection?"

"Of course I have no objection to make the acquaintance of any sensible, right-minded persons."

"I don't pull my neighbours to pieces to find out what their moral consciousness is made of," observed Mrs. Wilding. "There is also a dance on the 28th. You had better know the worst at once."

"You are aware," said her sister, "of my sentiments on those points. I consider all such entertainments as traps for the foolish

and unwary, and most pernicious to the young and innocent."

"Oh, well, *I* don't," returned Mrs. Willing shortly. "So there is no use in discussing the matter."

"None at all," said the other. "You must go your way, Fanny, and I must go mine. But we shall have to account for all our actions."

"And for all our words," retorted her half-sister, whose temper, usually placid, appeared this afternoon to be tried beyond its powers. And Eveleen, seeing storm signals ahead, interposed.

"Come, auntie, don't be so terribly severe," she said. "I have danced all my life, and I don't know that I am such a very immoral or perverted character. Young people must have a little fun, you know, and Detta has left school and is coming out at our dance."

"Oh! it's for Detta's sake, is it?" inquired her aunt. "Poor child, rescued from the errors of Romanism in order to fall into the pit of this world's pomps and vanities!"

"Well, as to vanities, I suppose we all have

those, Aunt Maria ; but I don't think mother and I go in much for worldly pomp. Besides, what could we do with Beresford Conway on our hands all the time, and nothing to amuse him ? ”

“ Oh, he is here too, is he ? It is a matter of surprise to me, Fanny, how you can permit that idle, dissipated young man to hang about your house in the way you do. I assure you, it is much commented upon amongst our friends.”

“ If one were to heed comments one would never do anything one liked. Beresford Conway is not dissipated, and I have him here because I like him.”

“ The outside world must be excused if it puts another motive down to you,” remarked her half-sister unpleasantly. “ Beresford Conway is a very good match, according to worldly reckonings.”

“ Am I to dislike everybody who happens to be rich ? ” demanded Mrs. Wilding. “ Of course, I know it is *very* difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven ; but still it is just possible for a wealthy person to

be also an estimable one—as, for instance, yourself, Maria."

"I know you do not wish to hear what I have to say, Fanny," observed the other, "but I feel it my duty to speak plainly. All the more so, that it is clear the young man has no serious intentions whatever, and is simply spunging upon you for the sake of his own convenience. You will merely render yourself ridiculous, if you do not put a limit upon his visits, as all the world will say you have tried to catch him for your daughter, and have failed."

Eveleen jumped up, a sudden pink flush upon her fair cheeks.

"Allow me, Aunt," she said, "to have a little voice in the matter. Let me state, once for all, for your satisfaction, that, although I am sincerely fond of my cousin, and he, I hope, of me, I have never entertained the smallest ambition towards what you call his intentions. And permit me also to say, that if the outside world thinks it impossible for any one to exercise hospitality towards a friend and relation without such motives, it

is not only an uncharitable, but an exceedingly vulgar world."

"I am sorry you should receive my observations in such a spirit," remarked Lady Dumbarton.

"Maria," said Mrs. Wilding, putting down her tea-cup with an energy that made the china ring, "I must decline to discuss such matters before a stranger, even to oblige you."

Lady Dumbarton glanced towards her companion, who, for the last few moments, had been diligently employing herself in the mysterious occupation called tatting, and had now risen to prepare a saucerful of bread and milk for the little dog; but whose inquisitive ears, Mrs. Wilding felt assured had not lost one syllable of the conversation.

"Sparke," she said, "is not a stranger."

"Not to you, perhaps," retorted her half-sister.

"Besides," continued the elder lady, "truth should never be unwelcome to the mind of a sincere person."

"I hate your sincere persons!" exclaimed

Mrs. Wilding. “If it comes to a choice, I would rather put up with a good-humoured, agreeable humbug, than a so-called sincere person, who feels it his duty to be always picking holes in his neighbours.”

“I,” said Lady Dumbarton, “am always glad to hear the truth.”

“Then, I don’t believe you, Maria! Suppose now, you were someone whose little natural defects required an artificial remedy, would you like your maid to come into the drawing-room and tell everybody how many false teeth you wore, or how much of your hair was your own?”

Lady Dumbarton was silent. A little flush rose to her cheek, and her glance increased in severity. The shot had told, as her affectionate sister had intended it should; for the neat row of brown curls which adorned the good lady’s forehead, were, as the other well knew, the artistic production of Mr. Truefitt.

“Sparke,” she said, presently, in her stateliest manner, “kindly fetch me my handkerchief; I think I have left it upstairs.”

“ Certainly, my lady. And will your ladyship have Dandy on your knee, now? He has finished his tea.”

“ You may lift him up, Sparke.”

“ How that woman does ‘my lady’ you!” exclaimed Mrs. Wilding, as Miss Sparke left the room with her usual noiseless step. “ I can’t think why you don’t tell her, Maria; it’s such very bad style.”

“ Mamma, dear,” said Eveleen, laughing, “ you are cross. Do you hear the noise of wheels? It must be Beresford. Ah! and here is Detta at last.”

The greeting between Benedetta and her aunt was not an uncordial one. Lady Dumbarton’s peculiar words and ways, although they often puzzled and sometimes amused the Anglo-Italian girl, yet did not seem to annoy her in the way they annoyed the others. The natural straightforward simplicity of Detta’s disposition disposed her to be more submissive beneath the elder woman’s strictures, and gave her a certain attraction in the eyes of the latter, who, in her stern way, was really attached to her

niece. Notwithstanding her impulsive nature and foreign extraction too, Detta possessed in reality, more of the virtue of toleration than either Eva or her mother, and was more capable of perceiving the certain amount of real worth and integrity that underlay Lady Dumbarton's narrow prejudices and conventional mode of expression.

Her entrance somewhat restored the tone of good breeding, which had for the last few minutes been running a perilous risk of extinction. She answered her aunt's many questions quietly and simply, and received in silence her admonitions regarding the perils of the gay world in general, and of the coming dance in particular.

Eva meanwhile was bending over her mother, whispering :

“Now really, mamma, you must be more patient, or we shall be in for a row royal first thing. Think what a lively time we shall have of it, if you and Aunt Maria go on hammer and tongs at each other like this for the next three weeks—”when the door opened and Beresford Conway entered the room.

“At last!” exclaimed his cousin. “Your tea will be very weak, Beresford.”

“Thanks,” he said, coming forward. “Your servant, Lady Dumbarton.”

Lady Dumbarton bowed stiffly. She had no intention of disguising her prejudice against her sister’s visitor, but Miss Sparke took the hand he held out with effusive politeness. “Glad to see you again, Miss Sparke,” he remarked somewhat vaguely and unveraciously. And Miss Sparke, notwithstanding her uncertain age, blushed as she murmured some inaudible response.

“What sport?” inquired Eva.

“One good run—towards the end. Lasted nearly forty minutes.”

“You were in at the death, I suppose?”

“Well—no, I wasn’t.”

“You knocked out of time? Never!” she exclaimed incredulously.

Mr. Conway was silent.

“Had a spill?” demanded Eva.

“Well—yes.”

“A bad one?”

“Bad for Beauty,” returned her cousin.  
“She’s—in fact—she’s dead.”

“Good gracious!” exclaimed Mrs. Wilding, “dead! How did that happen?” There was great commiseration in her tones, for both she and her daughter knew that this chestnut mare was quite the favourite of Mr. Conway’s little stud.

Beresford sipped his tea slowly, his colour a little higher than usual.

“Staked herself,” he replied at length, “going over a hedge. Jumped on to the paling beyond instead of clearing it. I shot her.”

“You did?” exclaimed Mrs. Wilding. “The poor thing! Oh, Beresford, I am so sorry for you.”

Mr. Conway got up and walked towards the window.

“Thank you—yes, it’s a bore—just at the beginning of the season, too,” he remarked, his drawl more pronounced than usual. “The frost is breaking up nicely to-day.”

“Couldn’t anyone else have shot the poor

beast?" asked Eva. "It must have been so horrid for you to do it."

"Well, yes, I suppose they might," he returned. He did not say that he had preferred to do the painful task himself, feeling that a quick and merciful death was the last kindness he could render to the animal he loved.

"All so-called sport is cruel," remarked Lady Dumbarton sententiously. "I cannot conceive of a christian-minded person allowing themselves to take part in such occupations"

No one answered her, but after a pause she continued:

"I cannot imagine what can be the amusement to any rational mind in rushing madly over ploughed fields and attempting to break his neck over hedges and ditches—all for what? To pursue and capture an animal which, when killed, is absolutely valueless!"

She was addressing herself pointedly to Mr. Conway, and evidently expected a response.

"No?" he replied. "Perhaps you never cared for hard riding? People amuse themselves in different ways."

But this reply was not of the nature which Lady Dumbarton had intended to elicit. She had no wish to be put on a par with those she condemned, and considered simply as differing from them on the score of personal inclinations.

“Were I ever so devoted to riding,” she remarked coldly, “I should still eschew hunting. Providence has created the animal world to supply our necessary wants, but not to minister, by their sufferings, to the gratification of unfeeling amusement.”

“Quite so,” he remarked in an exhausted tone, as his eye caught the heavy fur trimming of her handsome dress. “But few of us, I suppose, are consistent. I don’t, for instance, pretend to understand the exigencies of a lady’s—toilette—but still, there are sealskin jackets, and—a—feather muffs and other things. Seal hunting is cruel work, they say—”

“Beresford,” said Eva, “why have you stroked your hair down over your forehead in that extraordinary way?”

Miss Sparke, who was gliding to the other side of the room, gave a little shriek.

“The blood is trickling down!” she exclaimed, clasping her hands.

Conway hastily put up his handkerchief.

“Beg pardon,” he said. “I thought I had washed it off.”

“Did you hurt yourself to-day?” inquired Mrs. Wilding anxiously.

“A scratch only. Don’t fuss, Cousin Fanny.” For Mrs. Wilding, with demonstrative affection, had run to his side, and turning back the short, flaxen hair, displayed to public view a large plastered cut.

“About dressing time, isn’t it?” he continued, rising with an evident air of being overburdened by the general commiseration.

Lady Dumbarton alone, however, had gazed upon the wound in silence; and as he slowly dawdled out of the room, her comment was audible to him.

“Mad infatuation!” she exclaimed, lifting both hands into the air, “a valuable horse killed, and the precious life of a human being

risked, all for the sake of running after a poor little harmless, panting quadruped."

Which remark, like the comments of most prejudiced persons, shewed a painful inability to grasp the simplest bearings of her subject.



## CHAPTER VIII.

### A SERIOUS CONVERSATION.

CHRISTMAS at Ashley Manor was scarcely kept after the good old fashion. It was rather typical of the modern school which votes all sentiment a bore, and openly acknowledges old customs to be out of date. Lady Dumbarton's theories on the subject of the season were severe, her sister's festive and social, while Beresford Conway gave it as his opinion that the popular notions were a vulgar anachronism. They only taught people, he said, to feel the obligation of stuffing themselves inordinately with turkey and plum-pudding, to drink champagne to excess, and to sing stupid comic songs or more stupid carols. In fact, it was a festivity now relegated to the lower orders and entirely tabooed by persons of position or good taste. Under

these circumstances, Mrs. Wilding felt it incumbent upon her to mark the season as little as possible.

A barrister connection, a nephew on her husband's side, came down for a three days' visit during the course of the week, and being a clever, agreeable man, gave a momentary spurt to the family-party; but, for the rest, the time passed with sufficient monotony to justify Eveleen's assertion that Christmas was always the dullest period of the year. The weather was mild and damp, and Mr. Conway was absent most days either hunting or shooting, leaving the ladies to make the most of a somewhat uncongenial quintette indoors. During these quiet hours, Detta's thoughts often strayed back to the great festivals of her childhood. What times of excitement and delight they had been! She remembered, as if it had been yesterday, the mornings when 'Nunciata had taken her to see the image of the Child-Christ lying before the altars; and the evenings when, hand in hand with Ino, she had wandered into the crowded streets and watched the Girandola flame out above

the Pincian hill—or penetrated into the still more crowded churches, where the brilliant lights and the bursts of music made her little heart swell with a mysterious rapture. How she had loved those glorious times of Christmas and Easter! Were there any churches in Christendom like those of old Rome? Could any ritual be so gorgeous, so heart-stirring as that to which she had been then accustomed? Detta had been carefully instructed since her coming to England in the faith of her own people; yet the beauty-loving soul of the half-southern girl was apt at times to hanker wistfully after a more sense-satisfying worship than that to which the last six years had habituated her.

A few days later came the dance.

It was to be a large one, including most of the county people. The house was turned nearly upside down, and Lady Dumbarton's groans over the frivolity of the world—possibly accentuated, as Mrs. Wilding observed somewhat maliciously to her daughter, by the slight feeling of discomfort unavoidably imported into even the best regulated of small

households on such occasions—increased in number and severity. She declined to be present when the evening arrived, alleging her inability to sympathise with entertainments of the kind ; and unconscious of the secret relief her decision afforded to her relations.

It was the first occasion on which Detta had been present at a dance since the days of her childhood. Then, in Carnival time, Ino had sometimes led her for a treat into some large, well-lighted room where the masquers were madly twirling and flinging themselves about. The dancers to-night were of a different order, both as regarded their dress and mode of action ; but Detta fancied that the Carnival masquers had enjoyed themselves more. There was a solemnity about some of these guests, especially the gentlemen, which seemed unsuitable to the occasion. She herself, though quiet and graceful in her movements, yet danced with that light-hearted ease and vivacity which gives pleasure to the onlooker, as appearing the spontaneous expression of youth and happiness. She was a little silent without being exactly shy ; and the

gentle gravity of countenance which yet appeared compatible with so much genuine girlish enjoyment, was perhaps one of her greatest charms. She was quite unconscious that she was the principal attraction of the room ; but Eveleen had soon possessed herself of the fact, which, with her customary generosity, she made a matter of much exultation.

“ Mama,” she exclaimed before the evening was half over, “ Detta is the belle of our dance. There is no one equal to her. Look how all the men are running after her ! I declare not one of my old admirers remains true to me ; always saving and excepting poor dear Sir Peter, who, I suppose, has not brains enough to see how much more beautiful and fascinating she is than I.”

“ Men always run after the last novelty,” remarked Mrs. Wilding a little drily. “ Good looks are a matter of individual taste. A dark, foreign-looking girl like Detta is unusual, and therefore sure to be made much of at first.”

For Mrs. Wilding did not fully reciprocate Eva’s enthusiasm, nor feel the same unalloyed

satisfaction in the fact that a homeless, penniless niece should eclipse her own long-admired child. However, so long as Sir Peter remained true, the desertion of lesser stars was a matter of minor importance. If only Eva could be persuaded not to snub the wretched man so persistently, he would, Mrs. Wilding felt assured, have promptly laid his title, his handsome property, and his seven thousand a year, at the tiresome girl's feet. He was not so good a match as Beresford Conway, nor could she ever feel the same regard for him that she entertained for the latter; but people must take things as they came, and, as the best appeared unattainable, she was prepared to be fully satisfied with the second best. Eva had, however, at present, no idea of putting up with second bests of any sort, and the manner—one of obvious indifference and good-humoured mockery—in which she treated her adorer this night—now bringing him to her side with a smile, anon casting him into the depths of despair by a studied coolness—was really enough to disgust that gentleman with his suit, and to justify the irritation of her

watchful mother. It was a little annoying to Mrs. Wilding to perceive the attentions bestowed upon her niece by Beresford Conway. As usual on such occasions, Mr. Conway did not join in the prevailing pastime with the unseemly ardour of the more juvenile guests. But, as usual, he engaged himself to a lady for each dance, giving her a languid turn or two, alternating with a cup of coffee or an ice, and a pause of still more languid conversation.

As his exertions, however, seemed to satisfy his partners, there was little incentive for him to attempt more. When a man is young, good-looking, the son of an earl, and the possessor of unknown thousands, it would surely be a work of supererogation for him to condescend to the art of making himself agreeable. Nature has, in fact, already done that part of the business for him—he is made agreeable, without any self-participation in the matter.

Mr. Conway had been taking one of his slow turns with Detta, secretly dissatisfying her by his want of vivacity in the performance; and, having in his own opinion fulfilled the more laborious part of his obligations, had found

his partner a chair and sunk into another beside her.

Ten days or more spent together in the same house had brought about a certain degree of intimacy between the two ; and Detta held her fashionable companion in none of the respectful admiration evidently entertained towards him by some of the younger and simpler maidens present. She was, on the contrary, a little inclined, I fear, to judge him uncharitably, to consider his dignified self-importance as mere conceit, and his deliberate mode of speech as affectation.

“ You are very soon tired,” she observed, as he leant back with an exhausted air ; “ I am afraid you cannot be very strong.”

“ Do you want to go on dancing ? It is very comfortable here.”

“ I could not be so cruel as to rouse you again.”

“ I shall be roused directly, if I don’t take care,” he remarked with gentle irritation. “ That old—a—woman, Mrs. Hilton Thorneycroft, has been eyeglassing me for the last quarter of an hour, and this is the first place

I have found where I can avoid her basilisk glance."

"Why should you wish to avoid her glance?"

"Well, you see there are three—Thorneycroft daughters. They are all short of partners. And, having been twice to her house this season, the old mother seems to think it—my duty to dance with them all round."

"Then the quickest way would be to get through your duty at once."

"That's impossible!"

"Why so?"

"Well, first because I never do my duty, and secondly, because the Thorneycroft family are an awful lot of bores. By Jove! if she hasn't changed her seat, and brought me within range again! She don't—a—approve of my sitting so long by you."

"What can it matter to her?" said Detta.

"She won't succeed in ousting me, however," he continued, "I always do as I please."

"But," she observed, turning towards him—whether sarcastic or in earnest he could not

tell—"if by so simple an action you can give so much pleasure to four people, you must indeed be considered a happy person, must you not?"

"Happy? Well, I don't know. At present I am not unhappy, sitting here."

"Then," she said, half rising, "I cannot allow others to suffer through me."

"Which means," said Beresford, "that you are tired of me?"

"I always mean what I say," was her reply. "Go and do your duty, Mr. Conway."

"Not so," he replied; "I shall sit here. 'Pleasure before all things is my motto.'

"Then I am sorry for you," she said, as she put her hand within the arm of the new partner who had come to claim her.

It was nearly an hour later when Mr. Conway again approached her. Detta's nimble feet were beginning in reality to tire a little now, and she had no objection this time to a seat beside her companion.

"What did you mean," he asked presently, "by saying that you were sorry for me? Were you serious or in fun?"

“ You have never been considered a subject for pity before? ” she demanded, smiling demurely.

“ Well, I don’t know that I have. I believe—a—that I have always been held rather a lucky fellow. You see I have had pretty much my own way in most things since I can remember.”

“ That is the reason why I pity you,” she said gravely. “ Perhaps that is what has made you tired of everything, as you say you are, you know.”

“ You think people with hard lives have the best of it? ”

“ I think people with something to do are the happiest.”

“ Ah! very likely. Nobody ever does anything in my family—anything useful, I mean. My father reads the papers, and goes out to dinner, and trots down to the House of Lords occasionally. My eldest brother runs about the Continent and fills scores of sketch books with dreadful daubs, and my worthy step-mother occupies herself in fattening up a covey of spoiled lap-dogs, and consulting with

doctors innumerable regarding the delicacy of her nerves. We're a useless lot; there's not one of us could make a sixpence if he were obliged to work, nor coin an original idea if his life depended upon it. As for duty and all that sort of thing, I always think it must be an awful bore."

His companion was silent, and by degrees her expression of undisguised commiseration brought a smile to his lips, exhausted as he was by his own unusual eloquence.

"I suppose now," he said, wishing to hear her voice, "that your—surroundings were quite different as a child?"

"Very," she replied emphatically. "There was my dear old Maestro who played in the orchestra at the Opera—I think he is there still—he loved his music, Ah, how he loved it! And there was Annunciata—she was always busy—she did all the household work, the cooking and the cleaning, and everything. And there were Pippo and Ino, her sons. Pippo was at school every day; but Ino, the eldest, was a sculptor—at least he was beginning to be one. He was hard at work all

day long; and, when he came home, his hands were never idle. He was always modelling something or making a drawing for the model. They say he models beautifully now. I am sure he will be a great sculptor some day. And, perhaps—he will come to England this winter, and I shall see him again."

She was leaning back, her hands lightly clasped together, and her eyes half-closed, as, with a happy smile that had much tenderness in it, she recalled to herself these bygone reminiscences.

Beresford Conway gazed at her with an interest in which was mingled curiosity, and just a grain of some new feeling he never remembered to have experienced before. Was it jealousy?

"How old is this Ino of whom you speak?" he asked presently.

"He is six years older than I. Let me see—by now he must be twenty-four."

"And handsome, I suppose, like all Italians?"

"Ah! yes, he was always beautiful," she

replied, still regarding the past, and speaking absently.

“ You were very fond of him, I suppose ? ”

“ I shall always love Ino,” replied Detta with simple warmth. And then she suddenly opened her eyes, and a faint flush rose to her cheek, as she became conscious of his gaze.

“ Shall we go back to the ball-room ? ” she began. But Beresford interrupted her.

“ Tell me, Miss Campbell,” he said, “ which would you rather be, an Italian or an English young lady ? ”

“ An English young lady,” replied Detta. “ But oh ! an Italian peasant,” she added quickly. “ Their life is so full and free ; it has so much more change and warmth, and sunlight than those of this country.”

“ And the young lady ? ”

“ Ah ! she is just a prisoner in Italy ; there is no largeness or freedom in her life, as with English girls. She must not stir out by herself ; she knows nothing of the world, and has no sympathy in its great events. Her life and her thoughts get all narrow and

secluded. And when she comes to marry—Ah! then it is dreadful!"

"Why so?" asked Beresford, with an involuntary smile at the girl's earnestness.

"They have no real choice," said Detta. "They know nothing about their future husbands—sometimes even have not spoken to them—before they are betrothed. In Italy a girl has more proposals than in England. If she come of a respectable family, and is not disagreeable-looking, and has some trifling *dot* (for the men there do not expect much money with their wives)—then many gentlemen will offer to marry her, without waiting to know if she be amiable, or if her tastes are suited to theirs. But they do not speak to her. They go to her father, and make a formal request for her hand."

"And then the father chooses for her?"

"Not always. A kind father, if he approve of a man, and thinks the match a suitable one, lays the offer before his daughter, and leaves the decision to her. But what can her decision be worth when she has probably no knowledge on which to form her opinion? It

is often at random that she says yes or no ; and sometimes her lot is a very unhappy one. There was the case of a young lady to whom my old Maestro used to teach the violin. She was a delicate, refined girl, very gentle and timid, and with a passion for music. The Maestro used to say she was the quickest pupil he ever had. Her parents were not rich, but she was very beautiful. For a long time she would not marry. She said she could not bear to trust herself to a stranger, and that she was quite content with her father and mother and her musical occupations. She was three and twenty—quite old for an Italian girl—when she married.

“ Her parents pressed her much upon the point, and at last she gave way, and accepted the Principe Argentini. She knew nothing whatever about him, but she was of a romantic disposition, and the title pleased her. If she must marry at all, she thought she would like to be a Principessa. But he was a hard, bad man. He cared nothing for art, which was her one enjoyment in life ; he only cared for wine and cards, and for his boon

companions and their dissipated pleasures. He looked upon the Signorina Giulia as a pretty toy, and soon wearied of his bride; for he had not the mind to enter into her æsthetic pursuits, and she had not strong wit or determination of character, to keep him from returning to his old pursuits.

“A few months after their marriage, he began to illtreat her—to neglect her—and some said, even to strike her—and, before the year was over, she and her babe were laid together in the cemetery at Albano.”

“But hers was an extreme case?” enquired Conway.

“Everybody,” replied Detta slowly, “cannot die when they wish; but such a state of things makes many broken hearts; or, what is almost worse, ruins lives and hardens a woman’s heart.”

“I wonder,” said Beresford, “that the Italian young ladies are not afraid to venture upon matrimony.”

“It is the only way of getting out of the cage, you see,” she replied. “They long to mix more in the world, and to have

more interest and power in their lives. As soon as they are married, they have some position, some authority ; they can do pretty much as they like. Even an Italian bringing up does not prevent a girl longing to use her wings."

"And for the sake of the desired flight, she will even put up with a husband ?"

"It is the only way," replied Detta seriously.

"After all," said her companion, after a pause, "I don't see that there is much advantage in the English style over the Italian. Certainly an English girl often *thinks* she has her own way, and decides for herself ; but is it not generally a pleasing delusion ? Most suitable marriages are brought about by the agency of relatives or the force of necessity ; and, where a couple of fascinated fools become enamoured of each other, their judgment is in truth suspended ; and, under the glamour of what is called falling in love, they know as little of each other's real character as your friends in Italy, and are even more likely to make a senseless

choice.” He leant back with a sigh, to recover from the exertion of so unusually long a speech. But Detta’s glance, as she turned towards him, effectually roused him, although no outward sign betrayed the fact.

“ You do not really think that ? ” she asked, with something approaching scorn in her tones.

“ Think what ? ” he asked, half amused.

“ That people cannot know each other because they love one another ? ”

Beresford paused and twirled his moustache slowly.

“ I—a—have had so little experience in these matters,” he replied, probably bent upon teasing his companion. “ I fear I am a very unsusceptible man myself. But it is the opinion of the world in general.”

“ And the world is always right ? ”

“ Usually so, it seems to me. But then I am not original myself, I have no enthusiasm—I generally receive accepted dogmas as truths.” Detta made no reply. “ Do not facts bear me out ? ” he continued. “ Look at Eva—she hates Sir Peter Galloway, or thinks

she does, now ; but, as sure as we sit here, she will give herself up into his hands some day."

" She will not ! " exclaimed Detta. " She shall not ! Why should you think so ? "

" Because her mother is bent upon it, and because Sir Peter is bent upon it ; and because, though Eva is cleverer than both of them put together, they are more—a—obstinate. She will accept her fate of her own accord soon. And then," he murmured, " it will be Pegasus harnessed to a mule."

" It would be a shame," said Detta. " How can Aunt Fanny wish it ? He has no manners —he is stupid——"

" Bucolic ? " suggested her companion drily. " You are young, Miss Campbell. Do you not know that good breeding and brains are unnecessary where a man has eight or ten thousand a year ? "

For there was not, nor ever had been, any great cordiality of feeling between Mr. Conway and the young baronet.

## CHAPTER IX.

### LOVE'S REMEMBRANCE.

"**I** THINK," said Detta, "you are rather foolish to-night, Eva."

It was two or three days subsequent to the ball, and Eveleen had been paying her cousin's room a last visit before retiring for the night. This was no unusual step on her part; but Benedetta, who was by no means deficient in penetration, had been struck by certain peculiarities in Eva's manner, which convinced her either that something had happened to put the latter out, or that something weighed upon her mind, which she was desirous, but did not know how, to communicate.

"You have been locking and unlocking my dressing-case for five minutes, Eva," she remarked, "and have asked me three or four

times what I mean to wear when we go to lunch at Sir Peter Galloway's to-morrow. You don't really care a fig, any more than I do, whether I wear my brown cashmere or my black velveteen, and it cannot do you any real good to break the lock of my box; though, if it relieves your feelings, pray go on. What is it?"

Eveleen turned round, laughing a little awkwardly, as she faced her cousin.

"It's that, my dear—just that," she said; "the luncheon party."

"I suppose," and Detta looked at her closely, "you mean the host of the luncheon party?"

"Quite so, my dear. What a clever girl you are! I have no objection whatever to luncheon in the abstract. I think it is rather a good institution in its way."

"But you object to Sir Peter Galloway? I knew that before; and it does not astonish me. Why should you worry yourself about it, Eva?"

"Well, you see," said Eveleen, pulling in and out the stopper of a scent bottle which

stood upon the dressing-table, “the matter is not quite so easy to dispose of as you think.”

“Has he proposed to you, Eva?”

“He has, my dear; yesterday. It was all I could do to stop him at the ball; and you know how he has been pottering over here every day since. The bother of it was really wearing me to shreds; so, as he would not be put off speaking, I thought I had better let him have his own way, and get it over as quickly as possible. But, bless you, my dear, I never saw so obstinate a man in all my life! He wouldn’t take No, and insisted that I should think over it, and that he should ask me again, which I told him was a most foolish plan, as I was sure I should never like him; and that, if I was so weak-minded as to be bullied into saying anything else, he would probably repent of it as much as I should.”

Detta looked at her cousin gravely.

“You should not have said that,” she remarked; “you should have been firm in telling him you meant your No.”

“My dear,” said Eva, with a short laugh,

“I was as firm as all the Fates put together, until they badgered me nearly out of my senses.”

“They?” enquired Detta, quickly; “who else?”

“Why, mamma, of course.”

And Eveleen finally jammed the stopper into the bottle, and came towards the fire.

There was a minute’s silence. Then Detta approached her cousin, speaking earnestly--

“You will not do it, Eva?” she said. “You will not allow yourself to be persuaded into marrying a man whom you dislike—a man like Sir Peter?”

“I don’t know that I do dislike him, particularly,” returned Eveleen. “And after all,” she continued, somewhat irritably, “I can’t see why you and Beresford should despise him so. He isn’t deformed, or an idiot; and a young man with his advantages does not often go long a-begging.”

“What does that matter to you?” asked Detta. “He would not suit you; you would be miserable with him.”

“My dear,” said Eva, with another laugh,

“you forget how old I am. I am past the days of romance.”

Detta made no response.

“Many people say,” went on her cousin, “that the happiest marriages are where people begin with no false illusions. I should certainly have none with Sir Peter; and,” she added, half under her breath, as if to herself, “I have treated him shamefully, and he is very devoted—and poor mamma does so wish it.”

“It is a wrong to Aunt Fanny,” said Detta, “to think she would wish anything not for your happiness.”

“Poor mama! Yes,” said Eveleen, affectionately. “But she is persuaded it is for my happiness. She has always spoilt me; and I have never done anything to oblige her all my life long.”

“But, Eva,” said her cousin, “you puzzle me. Don’t you believe in abstract right and wrong?”

“I am not good, like you, Detta. “You are a dear little simple-minded, single-hearted girl—you musn’t expect me to look at things

as you do. I am a worn-out, worldly creature."

And she sighed.

"I am not good, and you are not worn out or worldly," replied Detta. "I am sure you respect yourself too much to marry any one without caring for them."

"It seems odd," remarked Eveleen, half pathetically, "to hear you say such things. I have always heard that in Italy, ladies and gentlemen marry from convenience, not love. And I thought," she added, smiling, "everything Italian was perfect in your eyes."

"My father was an Englishman," replied Benedetta gravely. It was a remark that constantly rose to her lips when the conversation took a turn relative to the respective merits of the two countries. "But, child though I was when I left him, the Maestro sometimes spoke to me on this subject. Ill-assorted marriages were common enough in Rome, and they always seemed to give him pain. 'Piccola,' he once said to me when I had been telling him some of 'Nunciata's gossip about a young bride whom we all knew by sight, but

whom he knew as an acquaintance—‘ be careful, before you marry, to know your future husband well. The most miserable marriages are not always between the worst, but between the least congenial people. Your father would probably have been a great man had your mother lived. At any rate, he would not have sunk to his grave under the weight of disappointment.’ ”

“ Mama is very different from what your father was, I think,” observed Eveleen. “ If it hadn’t been for her, Sir Peter would have been sent to the right-about long ago.”

“ Did you ever care for anybody, Eva ? ” asked her cousin suddenly.

The colour rushed over Eveleen’s fair face and neck ; and when she answered it was with a half-angry impatience.

“ Bless you, child, all we old maids have our romances ! Of course I thought I did—many years ago. But it all came to an end, as silly dreams are apt to do ; and I have been practical wisdom itself ever since. We carried it on for months—it was a long affair. But mama wouldn’t hear of it, and indeed she

was right. I didn't realise then, as I do now, that a soldier's pay and three hundred a year were doubtful guarantees of domestic bliss, let alone receipted bills——”

“Then you know you *can* care for someone,” said Detta, mercilessly. “Eva, mia, think of him now, and of what you felt at that time; and surely you will know better than to fancy you could ever be happy with Sir Peter?”

Eveleen turned aside her head, and Detta saw how the hand which lay upon the mantelpiece trembled.

“You had better let me be worldly in my own way,” she murmured. “I shall not be doing worse than many other women, I dare-say.”

“I won't let you!” exclaimed her cousin. “Tell me you will say No to this man to-morrow. Tell me you will be firm. He is not worthy of you; he swears, and he has no thoughts on any subject except horses. And you have no love for him—how should you have? Tell me!” she repeated, her arms about her cousin's neck.

The face that she kissed was flushed and moved, but smiling with audacious mischief.

“After all,” said Eva, “you are a silly girl. You would get no end of fun out of my house, if I were Lady Galloway.” Then she suddenly met her companion’s earnest eyes, and her own filled with tears.

“Why do you care so much about me, child? I am not worth it,” she said hastily. “You had better let me follow my own nature.”

“It is not your own nature,” replied Detta. “And I love you.”

“Well, console yourself, little girl; I don’t know that I ever could have swallowed Sir Peter, and I think I can promise now to resist almost any pressure, with you and my cousin Beresford to back me up.”

Benedetta breathed a sigh of relief. “Ah, I am glad,” she said. “It is quite settled, is it not?”

Eveleen laughed a little. “What an odd child you are!” she said, passing her hand caressingly down her cousin’s thick dark hair. “Sometimes you are so simple and innocent,

that one would scarcely give you credit for your eighteen years ; and at other times you talk like a moral compendium in three volumes ! ”

“ I do not care what I talk like, so long as you promise not to marry Sir Peter ! ” responded Detta. “ Good-night, Eva ! ” And then she whispered in a low voice, “ Dream of the old love to-night, Carina ! ”

But the dreams came long before Eveleen Wilding was asleep or in bed. There was a little tender softened look upon her face as she sat up that night, her hands clasped before her, gazing into the orange embers of her bed-room fire, living over again for a time that past which Benedetta’s words had recalled. A happy, silly, childish past, long put away and forgotten—at least, so she would have said to herself a few days ago—but now recurring with a vivid remembrance of every detail, and surrounded by a halo which must surely have been evoked by an unconscious contrast between the real old love and the false new one.

After all, she was not so hardened as she

thought. How absurd it was that this old tenderness should revive after so many years, as if for the purpose of protesting against the counterfeit thing which she had half thought of foisting into its place! It suddenly seemed to her as if it were yesterday, and not six years ago, since their last parting on that stormy April day, when she had walked with him towards the gate and they had said good-bye beneath the trees. How well she recalled every line upon his face and every word he had said as he bent down and took both her hands within his own. ‘ You are the only woman in the world to me, Eva,’ he was saying, while the wind blew the fair hair off his forehead, and caught her cloak in its eddying, ‘ But, because I love you so much, I can release you, knowing that it is best so for you. I was selfish ever to speak to you ; but O, my love, there are times when feelings will betray themselves, and words will out against one’s will. And, however long it be, I will never ask any other to be my wife while you are single.’

Oh ! what an aching heart she had borne

as she returned slowly homewards, knowing that she had seen the last of Arthur Drew! The very thought of it now brought a pathetic wonder to her heart, and a sadness which was less regret over the lost lover, than over her own lost power of loving. Yet somehow, that night's retrospect added force to her cousin's persuasions, and placed Sir Peter's chances at once and for ever in the descending scale.



## CHAPTER X.

### SIR PETER PUT DOWN.

AS might naturally be supposed, the expedition next day to Bilston Court, Sir Peter Galloway's, had not much attraction in the eyes of Eva Wilding. Indeed, it may be asserted that she looked forward to it with feelings of decided aversion not unmingled with nervousness ; she longed for the excuse of a headache, or any other small indisposition ; but, notwithstanding a somewhat short night, she rose in the morning provokingly well and fit for the day's duties, as is usually the case with any one who has a strong wish to shirk them. There was nothing to be done but to go through with it, she felt ; and this time she was determined that there should be no mistake about the matter, and that Sir Peter should be made to understand,

once for all, that any further discussion was absolutely useless. Yet as she stepped into the carriage that morning, in company with her mother and cousin, Eveleen had some sympathy with the feelings of a criminal going to execution. It was not only that she knew Sir Peter to be a somewhat rough, coarse young man, whose behaviour, when disappointed or irritated, might possibly be apt to get the better of the usual conventional restraints—it was perhaps also that she knew or fancied she knew that he might think he had not been treated altogether with fairness in the business. For her part she had never intended to deceive him—in fact she had often been rude enough in her conduct towards him to disgust nine out of ten men in such a position—but she had more than a suspicion that her mother's behaviour had not been equally open and honest. She fancied that Mrs. Wilding, with her conciliatory manners and little flattering ways, had at times included her own self in her polite attentions, and had given Sir Peter to understand that she was an eccentric girl, whose feelings

towards him were by no means so uncomplimentary as her manner might lead him to suppose. Anyhow, she knew the young Baronet well enough to feel some uncomfortable misgivings as to the *mauvais quart d'heure* she would probably have to pass through. With the exception of Mrs. Wilding, whose spirits were at their highest, and who, ignorant of the revolution that had taken place in her daughter's mind, hoped the best from Eva's patient acceptance of her former remonstrances, and her present thoughtful and serious demeanour—no one of the party can be said to have undertaken the day's expedition with any particular sense of enjoyment. Detta, after the counsel she had given, so hostile to his wishes, felt something of a traitress in partaking of the young man's hospitality; while, as for Beresford Conway, he grumbled loudly at the loss of a day's hunting, and the prospect of three or four hours spent in uncongenial company, going merely as a personal favour to his cousin Fanny, who objected, she said, to the look of three women entering a room alone.

It was a lovely day, however—clear, crisp and sunny—and, by the time they reached the Court, even Eva had plucked up anew her spirit and prepared herself to meet the worst with equanimity. Mr. Conway too, who had ridden over and joined them in the drive, was bound to confess that the lunch was far less dreary than he had expected. Sir Peter was evidently on his best behaviour, and not nearly so loud and pragmatical as usual—Mr. Lumsden, his brother-in-law, on a visit to the Court, was an inoffensive little man, and his wife a pretty though faded and affected woman—whilst the two other guests, a brother and sister from a house in the neighbourhood, were really quite agreeable people. Mr. Carew devoted himself to Detta, whilst his lively sister employed herself in drawing out to the full Beresford Conway's somewhat languid powers of conversation. Eva felt, with momentary irritation, that these strangers, as well as everybody else, appeared to consider her attention and conversation the property by rights of her host.

But the *mauvais quart d'heure* was still to

come, and came only too soon. It was cruel of Beresford, Eveleen thought, when, after lunch, a stroll in the gardens was proposed, to keep so close to Miss Carew's side, and of Detta to walk on contentedly with Mr. Carew, without throwing even a glance of commiseration in her direction. Mrs. Lumsden had been left in the house, and Eveleen knew her mother well enough to place no reliance on her, nor to feel the least astonishment, although a little prophetic dismay, when Mrs. Wilding took the first opportunity of turning down a sidewalk, ostensibly to examine some botanical specimen, but really in order to leave the young couple to themselves. How she got through the next few minutes, or what were the exact words that passed between herself and Sir Peter, Eveleen could never distinctly remember afterwards. She was too confused, almost terrified by the young man's anger, and by his repeated assertion that she had played fast and loose with him, and made a fool of him. "I am sure, Sir Peter," she repeated vaguely; "I never wished to make a fool of you." And, despite her discomfort, a half-humourous

idea would present itself to her mind, that the evil deed he attributed to her was an impossible one, since nature had been beforehand with her. She had no clear recollection of how it came to pass that at length she found herself alone, but she remembered clearly enough the relief of that moment's solitude, and the irresistible desire she felt to laugh, when, at another turn, she again encountered her mother and Mr. Lumsden, and noted the look of incredulous horror and dismay that overspread that lady's features at the sight of her solitary appearance. No reference of course could be made to the subject in the presence of a stranger, but Eva felt intuitively that here was another *mauvais quart d'heure* in store for her. She had too an uncomfortable consciousness that the facts of the case must be patent to Sir Peter's brother-in-law, and she felt an impatient disgust of her position, and an intense longing to be home again, even under the maternal lash.

Meanwhile the party were moving towards the house, and as the ladies re-entered for a cup of tea, the gentlemen

turned off to visit the stables. Sir Peter had re-appeared in company with Miss Carew and her escort, but his words had been few, and his face was black as night. It was patent to the three men who accompanied him in his tour of the stables, that the young baronet must have just received some severe shock to his vanity and that his temper was not improved by it. His horses were his hobby, but even the perfections of the pet hunters failed now to evoke his usual bombastic form of conversation. He was taciturnity itself, save when some slight incident permitted him an opportunity of swearing profusely at one of his grooms. It was not an agreeable inspection. Little Mr. Lumsden looked positively nervous, as his eyes rested on the gloomy features of his big brother-in-law, while Mr. Carew took the earliest opportunity of escaping to the more congenial society of the ladies.

As for Beresford Conway, we hope he will not be deemed inhuman if we confess that the sight of Sir Peter's furious countenance aroused a sweet sense of enjoyment in his

breast. There had been an involuntary antagonism, a personal uncongeniality, from the first between the two; and it must be allowed that the Honourable Beresford had a malicious pleasure in watching the discomfiture of his companion.

“Anybody like a game of billiards?” enquired Sir Peter gruffly, as they returned through the out-buildings and passed into the billiard room.

“I don’t care if I do,” was Mr. Conway’s reply, as he began to take the cues one by one from the rack and examine their points. “But you, my dear fellow,” he continued, with an apparently friendly air, but with a glance of subdued relish in his sleepy eyes, “the ladies will miss you; I must not take up your time.”

“Ladies be hanged!” said Sir Peter politely. “I’ve had enough of infernal flirts and match-makers for one day.”

Mr. Conway bowed with a sarcastic courtesy that did not escape even the dull perceptions of his companion. Neither was Sir Peter blind to the lurking smile that rose to the

corners of his guest's mouth ; and his latent fury broke forth.

“ Ah ! ” he said, “ you can afford to laugh at me now. Perhaps you'll be made to laugh at the other side of your face some day. I'm not such a fool as not to see their game. I wish you joy of your bargain ! ”

“ May I ask,” enquired Beresford in his lowest and softest tone, “ if your remarks refer to my cousin, Miss Wilding ? Pardon the question.”

“ You may apply my remarks to her or to any other double-dealing d—d coquette you like ! ” returned Sir Peter concisely. “ And be hanged to your dandy affectations.”

Mr. Conway's blue eyes rested calmly on his companion's flushed face.

“ It is not, I suppose, etiquette,” he asked, “ to knock a man down in his own house—even a man who insults his guests ? ”

“ You had better try it on ! ” retorted the infuriated young baronet, pushing him roughly aside as he passed.

The next moment he was astonished to find

himself lying on the flat of his back upon the floor.

“It’s an awkward thing,” said Beresford, turning towards Sir Peter’s brother-in-law ; “but there are cases where there is—a—really no alternative.”

Mr. Lumsden looked aghast.

“It is unwarrantable, really unwarrantable,” he stammered, stooping to assist his fallen relative ; “I don’t understand it at all.”

“No?” asked Beresford. “Well, perhaps under the circumstances, that is—a little surprising.”

Sir Peter had by now raised himself into a sitting position.

“D—— you ! I’ll pay you out some day for this !” he exclaimed.

“As soon as you like,” returned Conway. “You can come over any day and try your hand on me, so long as you keep it—and yourself—out of my cousin’s sight. But you don’t want any more to-day, do you ?”

“Confound your insolence, no ! You’ve

broken my head in already. I'll have you up for assault."

"Then," said Beresford, turning to Mr. Lumsden, "perhaps you will be so kind as to make my adieux to Mrs. Lumsden, and to thank her for her kind entertainment of us. All things considered—and if she's—a—a devoted sister, she may prefer my *congé* to be sent through you."

When, a few minutes later, Mr. Lumsden joined the drawing-room circle, he was alone.

"Where are Peter and Mr. Conway?" asked his wife.

"Mr. Conway was called away on business, and begged me to say good-bye to you," he returned, delivering his message with some awkwardness, and totally ignoring the reference to his brother-in-law. He was uncomfortably conscious that not only his wife's eyes, but those of most of their visitors, were fixed upon him in surprised enquiry; also that his speech was followed by a perceptible pause, probably indicative of a suspicion of the truth on their part.

Sir Peter did not reappear; but no one

remarked upon the fact, and shortly afterwards the party broke up.

Mrs. Wilding's farewells, on taking her departure, were of the most cordial description; but, almost before she had seated herself in the carriage, a black cloud of portentous meaning appeared upon her brow, and she preserved an ill-omened silence throughout the drive home. No sooner had they reached the Manor, than she sought out the delinquent and demanded an explanation.

It was not often that angry words passed between Mrs. Wilding and her daughter, but on this occasion a heavy storm burst over Eveleen's head.

“It is enough to break one's heart!” exclaimed the elder woman, when the latter had stated briefly but truthfully the part she had taken and to which she intended to adhere in the matter of Sir Peter's suit—“you insult every man who pays you attentions. I believe you do it on purpose to spite me! You knew I had set my heart upon this, and so of course you put yourself against it.”

“Mamma, you know I tried all I could to come round to your wishes. Though *why* you should think Sir Peter such a desirable son-in-law, I fail to see.”

“I don’t suppose,” remarked Mrs. Wilding tartly, “that the sentiment would appear so very singular in the eyes of any one, except a conceited girl.”

“Really,” observed her daughter with a half laugh, “you seem very anxious to get rid of me, mama.

“You are an ungrateful girl!” exclaimed Mrs. Wilding, the tears in her eyes. “You know one reason,” and she paused truthfully, “why I wished you to take Sir Peter, was that you would then be always near me.”

“Nobody but you, wanted me to have him, mama; everyone else dislikes him.”

“Who didn’t want you?” enquired her mother. “Detta, I suppose? Did she advise you against it?”

“She certainly gave me her opinion.”

“What right has she to give her opinion? It is exceedingly impertinent of her to put herself forward in such a matter. It has

nothing to do with her, and she is a mere child."

"She is a very sensible and good child," said Eva.

Mrs. Wilding tapped the floor impatiently with her foot. "So it was she who persuaded you against it? You are a goose, Eva, to allow yourself to be led by a romantic girl of eighteen."

Eveleen made no reply; and her mother continued, with increasing indignation, "I did not expect such ingratitude of Benedetta—a mere pauper like her, taken into my house out of charity, to fly in my face and cabal against my wishes!"

"Mama, it is not fair to call her a pauper. You know she has something of her own."

"A paltry forty pounds a year—what is it?—which of course I would not touch, as you know, Eva. But, if she is going to behave in this way, she had better look out for another home!"

"Mama, don't go into a passion. You know you are fond of Benedetta, and she of you. She wasn't the only person who was

flattering enough to think me too good for Sir Peter. Beresford thought just the same about it."

" Ah ! " said Mrs. Wilding, her face clearing as if by magic, " of course he would ! He would'nt care much for the Manor if you were gone, Eva."

" We are very good friends," remarked Eva, carelessly.

" He is very fond of you," said Mrs. Wilding tentatively, almost timidly.

But Eva laughed her clear ringing laugh. " Mama, you are gone mad on match-making to-day ! Do put all such ideas out of your head, at any rate as regards Beresford and myself."

" You know best, my dear," said her mother, half offended.

" Yes, mama, I do know. Any one with eyes in their head can see that Beresford is head over ears in love with Detta."

" With Detta ! " exclaimed her mother aghast. " Nonsense, Eva, you are too imaginative."

The intelligence was undoubtedly a blow to

her, and probably added not a little to the feelings of irritation which were beginning to make themselves felt in her breast against her orphaned niece.

‘Benedetta is an interloper,’ she said to herself, with a sore feeling, as she left her daughter’s room. ‘Her presence here disturbs my plans and destroys my comfort.’

Up to this time she and her niece had been on the most cordial and friendly of terms, but from this date Benedetta began to feel that there was some indefinite change in her aunt’s manner, and some secret suspicion harboured against her in her heart. It did not take her long to discover this, for she was sensitive to a fault in her appreciation of the looks and conduct of those she loved; but she was too proud to ask for an explanation where she knew she had done nothing wrong, and knowing Mrs. Wilding’s impetuous disposition, hoped that the cloud might soon blow over.

But it was this perhaps which induced her, towards the end of Lady Dumbarton’s visit,

to accept an invitation from that lady to visit her shortly in the north of England. Lady Dumbarton had asked her to return at once with her ; but this Benedetta explained, in her little peculiar way, she could not do.

“I might miss Ino,” she said, “and that would never do. It would disappoint him so terribly, and me too, for Oh! I do long so to hear all the news, and how the Maestro goes on. I shall know in a few days now, most likely, and then I will write to you at Steynton.”

Lady Dumbarton was not altogether satisfied with this decision. She was an exceeding strict and proper-minded old lady, to whom not even the fact of extreme intimacy in childhood appeared to justify her niece in thus awaiting the advent of a young man with so much affectionate eagerness, and arranging her plans in accordance with his.

“It is a pity,” she remarked to her sister, “that these unfortunate Italian acquaintances cannot be dropped. After a six years’ separation, living in England amongst educated people, one would have thought that Bene-

detta might have forgotten her peasant friends."

"They are a low lot," said Mrs. Wilding. "I suppose it's in her blood, and she can't help it."

For, for once in her life, Mrs. Wilding, owing to the new irritation against her niece, was disposed to agree with her usually antagonistic visitor.

"It all comes of Edward marrying beneath himself," remarked Lady Dumbarton severely. "As for this young man, who, or what is he?"

"An artist, or a fiddler, or something of that sort," returned Mrs. Wilding, with aristocratic indifference. "I'm sure I can't remember."

"Anyhow, a most undesirable companion for Benedetta."

"He is very good-looking," remarked Mrs. Wilding, a sudden vision of the southern face, with its classic-cut features and boyish sweetness—as she saw it that afternoon six years ago at Miss Horton's school—recurring to her mind. "At least, he was."

“Worse and worse,” said her half-sister solemnly. “Good Heavens! only imagine if Benedetta were to fancy herself in love with him. She is painfully romantic.”

“It would be a dreadful thing,” said Mrs. Wilding, to whom however the idea presented itself at the present moment not altogether as a misfortune without mitigations. “But,” she added curtly, “I don’t see the romance in her. I only wish Eveleen were half as ready to set her cap at a good match.”

Lady Dumbarton was, in her way, a just woman. She was also, in her way, fond of her youngest niece.

“That is an unfounded remark, Fanny,” she said decisively. “In my opinion, Detta is not the girl to set her cap at any man. As for Eveleen, considering your bringing up, she is, perhaps, less entirely worldly than might have been expected. But the utterance of such a wish—I fear, a true one—is only too lowering to yourself.”

“Ah! well,” said Mrs. Wilding, “some people say what they think, and others say what they think will sound well. I belong to

the former class, though I believe the latter get on best in the world.” And so the interview, which, contrary to most interviews between the two sisters, began in harmony, ended as usual in a declaration of war.



## CHAPTER XI.

### GOOD ADVICE.

DETTA'S letter arrived sooner than she expected, and several days before Lady Dumbarton's departure northwards. It happened also to be the day on which Beresford Conway had at length decided to leave the Manor. From day to day his departure had been put off, until he had spent more than three weeks at his cousin's house. Now, however, he really was going ; and his horses had preceded him that morning to that particular part of Berkshire where he intended to spend the rest of the hunting season. Benedetta happened to be alone in the library when he descended, a little earlier than usual, dressed for dinner. She was looking out a book in the shelves, softly humming an operatic air to herself as she did so.

“ Can I assist you ? ” he asked, coming forward, with perhaps a little secret disgust at the inopportune joyousness of her look and manner. For did not he himself feel a vague and unusual regret this last evening of his stay ?

“ Oh, no, thanks,” she said, “ I really don’t know what I was looking for. I feel too happy to settle to anything.”

“ Why are you so happy ? ” inquired Beresford, who had not heard of the arrival of the Roman letter.

“ Ino is coming,” she said, her eyes dancing. “ He will be in England in a few days.”

“ Ah,” said Mr. Conway, in his slowest and most haw-haw manner ; “ that is the young man whose praises you sung to me the night of my cousin’s ball, I believe ? He seems a great favourite of yours.”

“ Of course he is,” she replied. “ He was like a brother to me. And he will tell me all the home news, and about the dear Maestro ! ”

“ So you call it home still, do you ? ” he inquired curiously.

She blushed a little.

“Ah,” she said, smiling, “when I think of them—of Ino and Pippo, and the Maestro—then Rome seems to me to be home again; but when I think of Eva,” she paused, “and—the others—then England seems my home.”

“But,” he said provokingly, “there is no one in England whose coming would cause you so much joy as this Ino’s?”

She closed her book with a little gesture of impatience.

“I can’t tell,” she said. “Why do you compare?”

“And Ino, I suppose,” pursued Mr. Conway, “will come down here at once to see you?”

“Why, of course he will! But he cannot come often or stop long. He will be too busy for that.”

“Ah, I remember,” said her companion, “he is the young man who is—my antipodes—one of the energetic serviceable bees of this world, as compared to—a—the useless and despicable drones like myself.”

“ I never used such rude words,” said Detta, half-vexed, half-puzzled by the latent sarcasm of his manner.

“ Forgive me. I did not mean to accuse you of impoliteness. But I think your sentiments were to that effect.”

She remained silent.

“ I perceive,” he said slowly, his eyes still fixed upon her face, “ that you will have no respect for me, until I obtain some honest employment. It must be a simple one, I fear, for years of idleness, and natural deficiency minimise the paths of occupation open to me. Possibly,” he continued languidly, “ I should be best suited for a club porter. I might—a —learn to run errands and open the door when the hansoms drove up.”

“ I don’t think,” she retorted, “ that you would ever do either well. You would be late for all your errands, for I am sure you could not run; and, if you sat in the hall, you would go to sleep instead of opening the door.”

“ Then,” he said, “ there is nothing left for me but to end life as I began it. I may as

well go comfortably into Berkshire ; and if I don't break my neck in the hunting-field, re-appear in town in time for the season. You see, Miss Campbell," he continued, a look of humour in his eyes, "you are like most reformers ; you put your finger upon the evil and cry out for a remedy, but —a—when called upon, cannot suggest any practical remedy. I am wise to be a conservative."

Detta glanced suddenly towards him, whilst the colour rushed into her face. He felt instinctively that she had something in her mind which she was too shy to make known to him.

" Well ? " he asked smiling, " Have you discovered my vocation ? Please tell me," he added, as she hesitated.

Thus invited, Detta raised her clear dark eyes full to his.

" If you want to work," she said, " why don't you do something for those poor people of yours in London ? "

Mr. Conway looked somewhat taken aback.

“Who told you of those poor people in London ?” he asked.

“Eveleen told me that you had property there, and that some of it was amongst the back slums of the City.”

“Did she tell you that I was a neglectful landlord ?” he asked, amused.

Benedetta’s face was crimson ; but she stuck to her colours manfully, although her words evidently cost her an effort.

“Eveleen told me very little about it, and I did not ask. But I have been in London, and I known what back slums are. I have driven through them once or twice ; and Oh, the people looked so wretched and starved and sickly and bad, that I have longed to go and do something for them. Are yours like that ? ”

Beresford Conway re-adjusted his eye-glass, and looked perplexed.

“I am afraid I can’t tell you,” he said ; “my agent looks after the property. I don’t know that I have ever been in the place myself ; but, judging from the situation, your description is probably not far wrong.”

“ Oh,” said Detta, the colour again mounting to her face with the eagerness of her words, “ then how *can* you leave them so ? ”

“ I am afraid,” he replied, observing her closely, “ I never thought much about it. But what could I do, Miss Campbell ? I can’t take round a basket of tracts, nor even basins of soup. I don’t know much about what ladies—a—call visiting the poor, but I fancy it resolves itself chiefly into a combination of those two acts of benevolence, does it not ? ”

Benedetta, full of her warm-hearted young earnestness, turned upon him an impatient face, glowing with reproach.

“ Why do you sneer at everything ? ” she asked. “ Do you do nothing for them ? ”

“ Very little, I am afraid,” he replied, still watching her curiously, and totally forgetting the fact of some considerable subscriptions and rent remissions which had, from time to time, been taken out of his pocket to relieve the needs and necessities of the Whitechapel poor. “ I beg your pardon,” he continued, with half quizzical humility. “ Teach me

better, and I will learn. What would you do?"

"There are such hundreds of things," she exclaimed, breathlessly. "Why don't you build them Coffee Houses and Reading Rooms ? or better than all, give them really good, healthy houses to live in—Model lodging houses, or that sort of thing ? And then," she continued, with growing enthusiasm, "I would have a Ragged School for the children, and Evening Lectures for the men and women. And the drainage should be perfect, of course. And there should be washing troughs for the women, and no end of pumps with fresh, sweet water ; and open fountains for the poor over-worked horses and cattle and stray dogs." She paused suddenly. "I beg your pardon. I hope I haven't been rude ?"

"Not at all," he replied.

"It is so easy to talk, is it not ?" she added with humility.

"It is—a—very improving to listen," said Mr. Conway.

As he spoke, he pulled out his pocketbook.

“Let me see,” he said, “your heads were admirable, but somewhat numerous.”

And he wrote down in his book:—  
“Coffee Houses, Libraries, Ragged School,  
Lectures, Drains, Pumps, Fountains, Model  
Lodging-houses.”

“Is that all?” he asked, placing the open leaf before her.

“You are making fun of me again,” said Detta.

There was no anger in her voice, but a little genuine disappointment.

“Nothing is further from my intentions,” he replied, closing the book. “This leaf will go up to my agent. He will probably object to many of the reforms, but some of them he will carry out, I daresay.”

Detta had never looked more beautiful, at any rate to her present companion, than now, as she turned towards him, her face full of joyous gratitude.

“Do you *really* mean it?” she asked. “How good you are to make up your mind so quickly! But why,” she continued, a shy

pleading in her tone, “don’t you make that agent do what you wish?”

“Perhaps I may,” replied Mr. Conway, a little absently, holding for a moment in his the hand that Benedetta, in her sudden access of gratitude, had half unconsciously held out towards him.

It was, perhaps, as well that the person who entered the room at this moment, was none other than Eveleen. Eva could be discretion itself at times, specially when any pet project of her own was in view. By nature, she had a large heart and a generous mind. She was totally free from those petty jealousies which rankle in the breasts of so many girls, and make it impossible for them to regard with equanimity attentions paid to another by an old admirer of their own, even when they have no desire themselves to transform that old admirer into a lover. Eveleen had made up her mind that Detta was the very wife to suit her cousin Beresford; while—as to the possibility of Mr. Conway’s failing to fascinate Detta—she might be excused for thinking (judging from

his career up to the present date) *that* a contingency too remote for contemplation. It was, perhaps, also excusable if Mr. Conway himself possibly regarded the matter in the same light.

He had never as yet met with any rebuffs from the feminine world ; and, it having been the general and openly expressed opinion of society for fifteen years, that his attractions were irresistible ; it was perhaps natural that of late he had acquired the habit of acquiescing in the opinion. It was not surprising that Eveleen, entering when she did, should feel her previous suspicions considerably strengthened. She was in time to catch the glow of fervour expressed upon Benedetta's upturned face ; even to witness the sudden loosening of the brief hand-clasp ; while her quick vision fancied it detected an unusual look in Mr. Conway's eyes—one more nearly approaching to tenderness than she had perhaps ever conceived it possible for those somewhat inexpressive features to assume. But, however important she deemed her discoveries, Miss Wilding kept them to herself,

feeling only a little disgusted when, as time wore on, Detta communicated to her no interesting confidences. But her quickened senses did not fail to overhear the next morning Mr. Conway's good-bye to her cousin. "When you come up to Town," he said, "you will have—a—to inspect the reforms, and see if they are rightly carried out."

This speech puzzled Eveleen, as also did the full cordiality of the answering smile which rose to Detta's face; and she began to question herself, as to whether it might not be possible that she had attached a more romantic meaning to her young companion's blushing gratitude than the veritable one.



## CHAPTER XII.

### A TAME SCULPTOR.

A FEW days after Mr. Conway's departure, Lady Dumbarton, with her retinue of companion, maid, and lap-dog, also left Ashley Manor.

Benedetta had gained her own way, as regarded delaying her visit to the North; and indeed, as Beresford Conway's shadow faded in the distance, and Mrs. Wilding's short-lived irritation calmed itself down, the latter changed her opinion, and acquiesced good-humouredly enough in the girl's natural desire to meet her old playfellow. Raffaelino Bartolucci gradually began, in Mrs. Wilding's eyes, to approve himself as by no means an unsuitable companion for her niece Benedetta. After all, it was creditable enough to the child that she should wish to keep up old friends. "If there be one thing

more than another which I detest," she said to her daughter Eva, "it is when people, who have risen from the ranks, become too grand for their old acquaintances. That is not true gentility. I am glad that Benedetta is not guilty of such snobbishness." Eveleen smiled her little silent, half-sarcastic smile. She had a less convenient memory, and had not yet forgotten her mother's conversation on the subject with Aunt Dumbarton. She guessed pretty accurately what was in the wind now, as she expressed it to herself; but felt no obligation to disturb her mother by interference; and merely stood by with curiosity to watch the course of coming events.

But, if Mrs. Wilding was prepared beforehand to regard the young Italian with feelings of very modified disapproval, his first visit changed her sentiments into those of almost unqualified admiration. As Eva expressed it to her friends, "Mamma and I have both fallen head over ears in love with an idyllic Roman sculptor."

Six years had indeed greatly improved

Raffaello, both in manners and appearance. His tall figure was still somewhat slightly made ; but, in other respects, he seemed a man in the prime of life. He had the same deep, poetic eyes, the same white forehead and curling black hair, and the same almost perfect features ; but a thick black moustache now shaded the lower part of his face, and rendered it even more picturesque than before. He had been thrown of late years a good deal into society—the mixed, brilliant, intellectual society of Rome ; and, by nature always a gentleman, had needed little of such intercourse to acquire that outward polish which is the visible sign of social standing. He was a man who would be at home anywhere ; and always the same, whether in the drawing-room of a princess, or the cabin of a peasant ; and in the grace of whose manner there was a gentle humility, which yet did not approach self depreciation. He did not delay visiting his former little companion ; and the morning after his arrival in England was ushered into the drawing-room at Ashley Manor.

His appearance at once won over Mrs. Wilding, who received him graciously and insisted on his remaining to luncheon. As it happened, all three ladies were in the room when he entered ; and Eveleen observed with some curiosity the meeting between Detta and her old friend. She noticed that the young Italian, even while making his salutations to the lady of the house, had allowed an eager glance to wander for a moment round the room, and that when Benedetta came forward, her eyes sparkling, lips smiling, and hands outstretched, that the colour mounted into the young man's olive cheeks with a flood of crimson, as, taking both her hands in his, he bowed over them without a word.

“ Why, Ino,” she said simply, “ I should scarcely have known you with that great moustache, it alters you so. Oh ! but it is nice to see someone again from dear old Rome. Six years ago, Ino—only fancy ! ”

“ It is a long time,” said Ino, as he bowed towards Eveleen, and took, with ceremonious respect, the hand she held out towards him.

“We must not be strangers, you know,” said Eva, whose warm likings or dislikings were generally adopted at a first introduction. “We are friends already. I have heard so much of you, when Detta was a little girl.”

Ino blushed again, and his emotional face expressed the surprise and gratitude he experienced at these kindly greetings on all sides. Were these the cold English of whose hauteur he had heard so often—quite as much from their own Bohemian compatriots in the Eternal city as from his countrymen? Could anything be less stiff, more free and social, almost affectionate, than the terms on which he at once found himself in Mrs. Wilding’s house? He had been prepared for snubbing, to be endured for Detta’s sake, and lo! he met with nothing but friendliness and encouragement. Raffaello was an unsophisticated, humble sort of being, notwithstanding his manly exterior and his good manner. He did not allow for the whimsical impulses of the fair sex all over the world, nor consider how far an attractive appearance was calculated to

disarm hostility. Nor was he likely, from his nationality and bringing-up, to be in a position to divine Mrs. Wilding's secret penchant for a new and poetic lion, such as was the possession of a talented young sculptor from Rome, with features like the world-famed statues of his own city, and a voice and manner absolutely unique amongst the denizens of her own more prosaic country. His origin, she reflected, would be totally unknown in London, and whatever the fashion of his speech in his own country, his broken English would, she decided, sound as refined and bewitching to her friends as it did to herself. Mrs. Wilding was in high good humour that day, and acquiesced pleasantly when, after lunch, Benedetta offered to take her old playfellow for a walk. Ino's eyes sparkled at the suggestion, which he had indeed been longing to make; but, owing to personal acquaintance with the strict manners of his countrywomen, and the faint credence he had given to statements of the greater freedom of English girls, had not ventured to think would be encouraged by the lady of the house.

“ Ah ! it is good to see you again, Ino,” repeated Benedetta, as side by side they paced quickly on in the bright frosty air. “ It seems to make me feel again as if I were the little Piccola that used to quarrel with Pippo in the courtyard, and go rambling with you about our dear old Rome ! ”

As she spoke she held out her hand again impulsively, and, gloved though it was, Ino raised it to his lips.

“ It is a long time ago,” he repeated softly.

“ That is not like a speech from an Italian,” laughed Detta gaily, “ to tell me I am growing old ! ”

“ Ah ! signorina mia, you have not yet reached the full bloom of life. To one of your age every advancing year brings but a fresh charm.”

“ What lady has taught you to make such pretty speeches ? ” asked Detta. “ But, Ino, there are two things I will have you do.”

“ And they are ? ” he asked.

“ The first, is to leave off calling me ‘ signorina.’ Why, it is ridiculous ! I was never anything but little Detta to you.”

“ But that is six years ago.”

“ Why should six years make any difference between friends like you and me ? *I* am not changed.”

“ Ah ! ” exclaimed the young man, while a flood of colour rushed into his cheeks, “ but I am ! ” His words, however, were spoken too softly for his companion to overhear. “ I will do as you ask, Detta,” he replied aloud.

“ The other thing,” she said, “ is to give up talking this stupid English. I must congratulate you on the amount you have picked up ; but Oh, Ino, I want to be back in Rome again for the next hour ! So now,” she continued, suddenly falling into the tongue of her childhood, “ tell me about my dear, dear Maestro. How is he ? ”

“ He is not ill,” said Ino, “ but he is feeble. He seems growing old before his time. He has given up all work at the Orchestra now, and only gives private lessons.”

“ Is he lonely, Ino ? ”

“ He and I live together when I am in Rome, and you know, Detta mia, he was

never a man to love much company. When I go back, I will be with him again, if God and my work permit of it."

"I long to go to him," said Detta, the tears rising to her eyes; "Ino, does he not wish to see me back, does he not want me sometimes?"

"Does any one who has known the sunshine not wish at times for its return?" he asked.

And the words, which would have been affected in the mouth of an Englishman, were the simple expression of thought in the impulsive and imaginative Southerner.

"But," he added, "he has grown used to solitude. He never seems to be alone, for his violin is always speaking to him when no one else is by. Pippo is gone, you know. Ah, I wish you could have seen Pippo before he started. He has grown into such a fine, strong, active young man. He is handsome to look at, and as fair as an Englishman. He has become gentle too now, and is quite changed from the days when he used to tease our little Piccola so sorely."

“ And Piccola used to run for protection to you,” laughed Detta.

“ Ah, Dio ! ” he exclaimed earnestly. “ Would I not protect you still through any danger this earth could offer, and feel it too much joy ? ”

Detta smiled again. She thought Ino had acquired the habit of saying soft speeches. It did not strike her that her old companion intended to convey any serious meaning by his words ; nor that Raffaello, with the sudden, passionate impulse of his race and of his disposition, was every moment falling more deeply in love with the gracious and graceful maiden, who in her childhood had been to him as a dear little sister.

The walk was a long one, for Benedetta’s desire to learn all about old friends and old haunts was not easily satisfied ; and the mere mention of the name of a street, a Porta, or a person, was sufficient to make both pause and eagerly recall particular walks, favourite views, half-forgotten conversations, or half-obliterated incidents. Nevertheless it was far too short for Raffaello, who would have been

only too happy to go on till nightfall discussing the tender memories of the old days with his newly-found companion. But twilight waits for no man, still less do express trains ; and the first having warned Benedetta to return homewards, a remembrance of the second forced itself upon the mind of the captivated Ino.

“ How long are you going to remain in Town ? ” asked Mrs. Wilding, as the young man began making his grateful adieux.

“ Two or three months, it is possible, signora,” he replied. “ It is my work will fix the time of my departure.”

“ Ah, then we shall hope to see you again in London,” said his hostess.

“ You must be sure to come and call on us,” added Eva cordially. “ You had better tell us your address now.”

The young sculptor returned to Town, his mind full of pleasurable emotions. They were both charming ; the fair, stout, middle-aged lady, whose brow was still so unwrinkled and her complexion so bright—a brow and complexion such as few women in his own

country would have preserved after thirty—and the lovely, sprightly, golden-haired Signorina, whose expression was so spirituelle, and whose features were so full of a mingled ‘malice’ and kindness.

The pair were indeed pleasing specimens, he told himself, of the high-bred English-woman, of whom he had before his coming entertained so unfounded a dread. While, as for his old playfellow——

“Ah, Benedetta mia,” he said softly to himself, “you are the fairest flower from mine own country that was ever grafted upon a foreign stalk; a man might live and die for you without reward. Who could help loving you?”

His agreeable reflections continued uninterrupted until the stoppage of the train at the London terminus, where he got out, and, still half-dreaming, made his way through the crowds blocking up the station. He was by disposition at all times gentle and courteous; but these qualities were perhaps more apparent even than usual to-night—for which of us is not unconsciously more tolerant with

the world at large when we are ourselves in a happy frame of mind? And many a busy man or anxious woman, who at length, in answer to the softly-worded request, gave way to let him pass, felt the half scowl on their features relax into something like a smile, as they glanced up and caught a sight of the beautiful young face. For if the classic outlines of Raffaello Bartolucci's features had been a thing to attract the attention of passers-by in his own city of Rome, where beautiful forms are so abundant and grace of movement is so common, they were not likely to escape observation among the far less highly-favoured countenances of our modern Babylon.



## CHAPTER XIII.

TWO'S COMPANY, THREE'S NONE.

DETTA'S promised visit to Steynton was fated to be deferred. Shortly before the time when she was to have left the Manor there arrived for her a letter from Miss Sparke, written in a style of lugubrious resignation to the will of Providence, and informing her that she was requested by Lady Dumbarton to say that it had pleased Heaven to afflict her with a serious attack of rheumatic gout, which confined her to her bed, and which made it impossible for her, for the present, to receive visitors. She trusted, however, as she was already beginning to recover, to be able to see her niece in the course of another week or two, when she would again communicate with her.

“ It grieves me,” said Miss Sparke, “ to be

the inditer of these painful tidings, knowing how justly dear to all at the Manor is your beloved and revered aunt ; and my only consolation is the being able to temper your anxiety by imparting our well-founded hope that the worst is now over.”

This epistle excited wrath in Mrs. Wilding’s bosom.

“ Fiddlesticks ! ” she exclaimed, when alone with her daughter. “ What a toady the woman is, and what gammon she loves to write. She knows as well as possible that Maria hates me, and that I hate Maria ! She tells lies simply from an innate love of humbug ! ”

“ Mama,” said Eva, with a doubtful increase of charity, “ you forget, some people are like cats, they must have everything soft and pleasant to the touch around them, even at the expense of truth. And, after all, it mayn’t be quite such humbug written to Detta. I have a suspicion that Detta respects Aunt Dumbarton quite as much as she does either you or I.”

After the receipt of this letter Mrs. Wilding

endeavoured to convince her niece of the desirability of her accompanying them to town.

“By the time your aunt has got over all her aches and pains, real and fancied,” she remarked, “it will be about time for us to start, and it would really spoil my pleasure to send you up to vegetate in that bleak Yorkshire desert just when Eva and myself will be beginning our fun. No, no,” continued the really good-natured woman, who had by now completely recovered from her temporary suspicions and her temporary loss of amiability towards her young relative, “you shall make acquaintance with our London friends and go everywhere with Eva. You shall have your chance as well as others. And,” she added pleasantly, “I don’t know that I shall be told that my two girls are the plainest and least agreeable out this season.”

In making these remarks, Mrs. Wilding had felt herself—perhaps not unnaturally—to be a magnanimous person. She did not suspect how one at least of her expressions, common enough, no doubt, in the fashionable world,

but unpleasantly suggestive to the mind of one young and simple-hearted — had grated upon the girl's ears. Detta had flushed deeply with mingled pride and disgust at her aunt's suggestion that she was to be allowed to "have her chance," but the flush, which Mrs. Wilding assumed to be one of pleasure, only served to confirm that lady in her good-natured resolve.

'Poor Edward,' she thought, 'no one shall say that I do not do my duty by his child. I will treat her like my own. This going up to town is, of course, an expense, and it is pleasanter to chaperone one girl than two, but she shall go, and in every respect shall share Eva's advantages.'

And Mrs. Wilding was so determined upon the point, that Detta, who was at first averse to the proposition, had to give way; but she took the occasion of laying before her aunt, somewhat abruptly, certain ideas which of late had shaped themselves in her mind.

"Aunt Fanny," she said, "I can't go on living upon you always. I will go up to London with you, and then I will visit Aunt

Dumbarton. But, after that, I must do something. I must either work for my living here in England——”

“Good gracious !” exclaimed Mrs. Wilding, jumping up, indignation expressed in her face and tone, “*that* you shall never do ! What do you mean by proposing such a thing ?”

“Or,” continued Detta, “I can return and keep house for the Maestro. That I think would be the best plan. I have almost enough to keep myself there,” she added in an undertone, “and Oh ! how I should love to brighten his life !”

“Now I call that very ungrateful of you, Detta,” said her aunt. “Have I not,” she continued, with a slight twinge of conscience, “always told you how welcome you are here, and treated you almost like a daughter ?”

“Dear aunt,” said Detta, putting her arm around the elder lady’s neck, and generously ignoring the brief glacial period that had supervened upon Eveleen’s rejection of Sir Peter, “you have always been kindness itself to me. And, as for Eva, I don’t know how I should do without her.”

“She would miss you horribly,” remarked Mrs. Wilding. “She is devoted to you. Indeed, it sometimes seems to me that she thinks quite as much of your opinion as of mine. I am sure she did in the matter of Sir Peter Galloway. And,” she added with a friendly little smile, “I don’t mind telling you now, Detta dear, that I was a little, just a very little, annoyed with you for the prominent part you took just then. It is all over now, however, and I am sure that you are too good and kind a girl ever again to thwart my wishes intentionally.”

“I am sorry I vexed you,” said her niece simply. “I could not help speaking. He would have made her miserable.”

“Well, the end of it all will be that she will marry nobody,” said Mrs. Wilding. “She snubs every man who comes near her, and it is not to be expected that they will put up with it.”

“I know of no one half good enough for her,” observed Detta.

“I know of somebody,” returned her aunt, “good enough to satisfy any girl; and,

between ourselves, Detta, I don't mind telling you that the match would give me great pleasure. I know you are a discreet little girl," she added, fixing her eyes upon Detta's countenance; "it is her cousin, Beresford Conway."

Whatever may have been her suspicions, they were dissolved by Benedetta's rejoinder.

"*He* isn't half good enough," asserted the girl. "Besides," she added, "there would be two objections to that. I am sure she doesn't care for him, and I don't think he is in love with her."

"As regards her not caring for him in that way, that's true enough, perhaps," returned her aunt sharply, "since, as I said before, Eva makes a point of not caring for anybody, and will probably go on doing so, if you encourage her. As regards Beresford, he is not a man to put himself forward for a rebuff; but all the county knows that he has been hanging about Eva for the last three years, waiting for a word of encouragement from her." Benedetta made no reply to this, and the conversation closed somewhat abruptly.

This had all passed, however, a week or two before their coming up to town.

Mrs. Wilding's visit to London was comparatively a short one, and she and her party were not of those who enter into the vortex of that melancholy Carnival, the London season. Her means were too limited to permit of her hiring a house for the full period, so she had established herself in a comfortable hotel situated in the vicinity of Hanover Square; and, although she had a good many friends and acquaintances, they were by no means all members of the gayest and most fashionable set. Hence it came to pass that, although invitations were fairly numerous, and that her young charges went out a good deal, yet that they were not overburdened by that conglomerate mass of so-called pleasure which yearly enfeebles the constitutions and ruins the nerves of so many healthy, happy young English maidens. When they went out they were not too tired to enjoy themselves thoroughly, whether at morning ride, or evening dance, concert or theatre; and it was perhaps to this fact, which left their minds

unjaded and their spirits still fresh and bright, as much as to that of the good looks of both, that the two girls owed their undeniable popularity.

Both Eveleen and Benedetta were greatly admired. In their small way each was considered a beauty, and it is doubtful whether Eveleen, with her little *piquante* person and fair features, or Benedetta with her Italian grace, and the sweet seriousness of extreme youth upon her creamy-tinted oval face, were the most sought after. Mrs. Wilding was in high good-humour: and, apart from any ulterior motive, was conscious of a genuine satisfaction in the social success of her two young people.

Mr. Conway was again in town; and, as a rule, found time to spend a portion of every day at his cousin's rooms. He had taken upon himself an air of ancient proprietorship and cousinly chaperonage that greatly amused both Eveleen and her mother. He would escort the two girls for their ride in the Row most mornings, and was generally to be found in the sofa corner at afternoon tea-time. He

seemed, however, Detta thought—perhaps through the enervating effects of the London season, which probably pressed upon him more heavily than it did upon them—to have become more taciturn, more didactic, and more haw-haw than before.

“That’s his Town manner,” remarked Eva promptly, when one day Benedetta ventured to intimate to her cousin her opinion on this subject; “it’s infectious: every man does it here, more or less.”

“They do,” said Detta. “I can’t bear it; they are just like so many half-dead fish. Their very fingers are so limp they don’t know how to shake hands; and their eyes are always half-shut and their mouths half-open, like the cod on the fishmongers’ stalls. And when they do speak, which isn’t often, a sentence seems to exhaust them utterly. Why do they go out if they don’t like it? I love dancing, Eva; it seems part of me; but sometimes I think I won’t go to any more balls here in London, but will wait till I can get a partner again who really cares for a waltz, and doesn’t do it out of duty.”

“You had better not,” laughed Eva; “there would be no end of a row if you were to promulgate such an idea before Mama.”

Notwithstanding its many enjoyments, the routine of town life did not approve itself to Benedetta’s mind on all points. She had an ardent appetite for real pleasure, but a deep scorn of those conventional pleasures which to her were no pleasures at all. No one could dance more lightly, laugh more heartily, or canter through the fresh spring air more gaily than she; but the mere occupation of seeing and being seen was to her at all times a wearisome and obnoxious one.

“Eveleen, dear,” she said one evening about a fortnight after their arrival, “must we really ride in that dreadful Row any more? It is so kind of Aunt Fanny to let me have the horse; but it is really too dull. Couldn’t we go out into the country somewhere?”

Eveleen pulled a face. She was by no means superior to the exigencies of fashion, and the habits of those about her.

“Good gracious—the country!” she exclaimed aghast; “who on earth ever dreams

of going into the country? Why, we should see nobody we know."

"That's the thing," said Detta; "I am so tired of seeing the same faces again and again, and hearing the same languid remarks. It would be so delicious to feel real grass under one's feet, and to be able to take a real gallop without fearing collision."

"Lath and plaster houses—cheap villa residences,—and dusty rag-and-bottle-covered commons most likely, instead of the 'real grass'!" retorted Eva ironically. "Is she not a strange girl, Beresford?"

"Miss Campbell," remarked Mr. Conway in his slowest and most deliberate tone, "has the misfortune to be original in her ideas. That is an error which should be stamped out in earliest youth. No woman should think for herself."

"It is a pernicious habit often acquired, I observe, by living in the country," said Eva laughing. "People have so little to do there, that, if they happen to have any minds at all, they are almost forced, for want of a better occupation, to employ them. But do I really

understand you, Beresford, that you too have a romantic hankering after the rag-and-bottle common?"

"We might, if we—a—exerted ourselves, perhaps get beyond the rag-and-bottle common," was his reply. "I am worse than Miss Campbell. I am not only sick of my kind, but of myself also."

"Poor Beresford!" said his cousin; "your liver must be out order. We must get you a tonic."

"And a country ride will give us all that," remarked Detta.

Thus outnumbered, Eveleen had to give in. The country ride next morning was undertaken and enjoyed; nor was it the last of the kind, as Benedetta adhered to her resolution to patronise no more the Lady's Mile.

Among the enjoyments offered by their London visit, none perhaps pleased the half-foreign girl better than a few quiet mornings spent amid old masters at the picture galleries. Raffaelino Bartolucci usually found time to be one of the party on these occasions, and would then, naturally enough, fall into

his place beside Benedetta, whilst Mr. Conway dropped behind with his cousin. Ino's love of art and appreciative knowledge of painting made him at such times a useful and agreeable companion; and Detta was well pleased to learn from his eager lips, and to improve her own judgment by his more experienced criticism—unsuspecting that the eloquence of the young man's speech was less due to enthusiasm felt for his subject than to the sudden rush of feeling inspired by her own unconscious, upturned face, with its dark questioning eyes, and full, sweet mouth. Often too, in the evenings, when it was as yet too early to prepare for the night's festivity, or when, perhaps, he had been invited to share a quiet dinner and afterwards to accompany the three ladies to some musical or theatrical entertainment, the young Italian, made quite at home in Mrs. Wilding's snug little drawing room, would pass an hour or two of dream-like happiness, his eyes fixed upon Detta as she moved about the room, or, perhaps, by general request, sat down before the piano to sing away the gloaming. The girl's voice

was a rare one—tender, deep, and powerful. She had, in respect of this gift, more than fulfilled the promise of her childhood ; and Ino, though in love, held no exaggerated opinion in believing it one amongst a thousand in its power to move the emotions of an audience. In singing, Benedetta, like every true artist, forgot herself ; and the half latent intensity that lay beneath her outwardly quiet demeanour, seemed then to break loose, and give free vent to its expression. She was herself always moved when she sang, she knew not why—the force within her seemed greater than herself ; and although, as a rule, of a reticent disposition, yet an emotion she had never defined then often left her eyes moist and her heart beating fast.

Day by day the young sculptor became more deeply, more helplessly enamoured of his old playfellow ; and day by day he found it possible to spare more time from his work in order to pass the hours by Benedetta's side.

For a time, however, not a word of love escaped his lips, although the girl herself

was perhaps the only one of the party to whom the fact was not apparent.

Eveleen stood by, curious, but silent. She hated interference in such matters, and spoke never a word, nor made even the smallest reference to the subject to her cousin. But she was not a little interested to observe the course of events. Mrs. Wilding, on her part, seemed rather pleased than otherwise with affairs in general. From some unexplained reason the subject was avoided between herself and her daughter; but her cordiality to the young Italian was unabated, and she indeed even appeared to encourage his constant attendance upon her niece. ‘He seems a good steady young man—he is a rising genius—he will very likely be a great man some day. They have loved each other from childhood. Benedetta is by nature more than half Italian; and, with her romantic disposition, would after all be much happier living in Rome near her old Maestro than settled down as a matter-of-fact Englishwoman in a prosaic country house.’ In some such way as this ran Mrs. Wilding’s private

reflections. Matters were at this stage when one evening, towards five o'clock, Beresford Conway entered the room where Eva was sitting by herself, turning over the pages of a magazine, and flung himself into an arm-chair beside her.

“All alone?” he asked. “Where is cousin Fanny?”

“Mama is gone to lie down. She is utterly exhausted with the round of pictures we went this morning. We brought the Signor back to luncheon with us. And now,” she continued, replying to this thoughts, “he and Detta are gone for a walk.”

“A walk?”

“Yes. To the Embankment. Detta has never seen it except from a carriage, and happened to express a wish at lunch to go some day; so of course Signor Bartolucci was on fire to take her there at once.”

“Ah! most romantic place for a walk,” said Mr. Conway. “Cousin Fanny is considered a good chaperone, is she not?” he added carelessly.

“You are severe on poor mama,” laughed

Eveleen. " You forget they have known each other from childhood, Beresford."

" An all-sufficing excuse," he remarked. " And when are we to congratulate these sentimental young people ? "

" If you ask me," said his cousin slowly, " never."

" Never ? My dear child, are you blind to the love-throes expressed daily upon the transparent countenance of your guileless sculptor ? "

" My dear Beresford, I am not blind to the fact that no responsive throes are visible on the countenance of Benedetta. I have taken some time to satisfy myself on this point, and I feel pretty clear now. And I think you must allow that I am a better judge than a great awkward man. She has only a sisterly affection for him."

" Pleasing, but perplexing for the brother —such affections," remarked Mr. Conway drily.

But Eveleen, who knew every line of the impassive face by heart, felt instinctively that her reply had tended to relax its severity.

Yet Mr. Conway's next observation was not flattering to the absent. "So then," he said, "Miss Campbell is not superior to the usual weakness of her sex in a love of conquest?"

"Beresford, you are unfair, and you know it. You know that Benedetta is true, and kind and womanly—that such a thing never enters her head. But she is very young, and very warm-hearted. I don't suppose she has ever found out that he loves her in that way."

"Ah!" said Mr. Conway, and a pause of a few moments ensued, while he drew towards him a dish of exquisite hothouse flowers, and thoughtfully examined them one by one.

"Who sent you these?" he inquired at length.

"Mr. Westmacott, of course. I really wish he would not; he quite keeps us in flowers."

"He is very devoted, Mr. Westmacott?"

"Very," said Eva with a short laugh.

"When are you going to become Mrs. Westmacott?"

"When the stars fall to the earth, and when you learn to talk sense."

“How many times has he asked you?”

“Whether he has asked me at all is a matter that concerns nobody but myself and him.”

“It is a pity all girls are not as reticent upon such subjects. Poor Westmacott! It’s a hard life for people in love. He wants to have you who won’t have him; our idyllic sculptor wants your cousin, and she, you say, won’t have him—everybody cries for the moon. What a foolish world it is!”

“And you?” asked Eva suddenly. Hardened though he thought himself, a faint tinge of colour rose under the fair skin, beneath the penetrating gaze of her eyes.

“I? Oh, *I* am a misogynist; *I* shall probably never marry.”

“Oh yes, you will,” she exclaimed; “if ever you meet with a beautiful, loving, sincere, lofty-minded woman. I know your standard is high, Beresford.”

“Beautiful, loving, sincere, lofty-minded—that is a good deal to expect,” said Mr. Conway. “Are there any such women to be had?”

“I know of one,” said Eva boldly, turning aside her head as she spoke, frightened by her own words.”

“A man,” said Mr. Conway, pulling his moustache thoughtfully, “must think himself not far short of perfection, to aspire to such a woman as you describe.”

Eveleen was silent. She knew her cousin better perhaps than anyone else knew him. Justly or not, she gave him credit for qualities, feelings and opinions, which rarely troubled the outer surface of the man; and to this fact perhaps, was owed the tacit sympathy and friendship which had for so many years existed between them. Few would now have recognised Mr. Conway’s society-tone, as, drawing his chair nearer to the fire which blazed upon the hearth, he continued the conversation.

“You are the last person to give matrimonial advice, Eva,” he remarked. “In practice you deny your theory.”

“Ah!” she said, “I am different.” And something like a sigh came from her as she rose and leant upon the mantelpiece opposite

her cousin. For he had known her story—she had no concealments from him.

He took up the poker and played with the fire for a minute or two. “Haven’t you forgotten that yet?” he asked after a pause.

“I can’t, Beresford,” she replied, half sadly, half impatiently. “I have tried, but it’s of no use. The thought of it *will* come back upon me at times. I don’t know that I care much—about him—now; but it seems to have taken the heart out of me for anyone else.”

Beresford Conway looked at her for a moment kindly; then he resumed his occupation, gently stirring the fire. “It is a pity,” he said. “Though,” he added, as if to himself, “a better fellow never breathed than Arthur Drew, nor one more worthy to be remembered by a woman.”



## CHAPTER XIV.

INO SPEAKS.

DETTA meanwhile and her companion were sauntering slowly along that new promenade which is justly the pride of London, and one of the grandest of its later improvements. They had now passed out of the vicinity of the noisier thoroughfares and had entered upon a quieter part where the thunder of the vehicles was but distantly heard, and where the Thames swirled solemnly by, calmly anxious to escape to distant meadows and the far-off sea. They had walked fast, for both were young and strong, and by no means fatigued by the sight-seeing which had so exhausted Mrs. Wilding; and their talk had been upon art, in eager discussion over the merits and demerits of the paintings visited that morning. But now they slackened their

pace a little, and presently paused to gaze at the turbid bosom of the great river rolling onward heavily and sullenly between its prison walls.

Raffaelino leant his arms upon the stone parapet.

“I begin to like this great, grey London,” he said dreamily. “At first it was to me a city horrible and hateful, with its fogs and its tall chimneys, and its gloomy sky, and the unpoetic, unpicturesque squalor of its poor. There is no colour in London, no blue in the sky, no frescoes on the houses, no crimson sash to relieve the rags of the peasantry, as in our own land ; and there is no song. London has no voice ; there is nothing but the yell of an omnibus driver or the shout of a drunken vagabond to relieve the monotony of the ceaseless roll of wheels. There is no poetry in the nights—no touching of a stringed instrument—no distant sound of the full notes of some wandering singer—no drip, drip, from the plashing fountains to break through the stillness of the cool, white moonlight. Yet I am beginning to see that there is beauty even in

London. The barges that sail up the river—the river itself, as the sun sets behind its many-masted vessels in streaks of crimson—the stately Houses of Parliament standing out severely in the moonshine—and the misty greyness of the aisles in Westminster Abbey. And it has great hearts and great deeds in it too, this gloomy London. I am glad I came to it, were it only for that."

"Ino," said Detta, "tell me, how is your work getting on?" The question seemed to startle him, and he made no reply.

"Is it much advanced since we saw it last?" she asked. For—herself demanding an invitation which the young man had been far too humble to proffer—Mrs. Wilding, on her first arrival in town, had, in company with her niece and daughter, paid a visit to Raffaelino's studio. "I thought it beautiful then," she said kindly, noticing his embarrassment.

"What little beauty it ever possessed is gone from it now, I fear," he said, speaking with constraint.

"Why, Ino? But Oh, that cannot be true!"

“ My hand has lost its cunning,” he said sadly. “ It seems so to me, at least.”

“ It cannot, must not be ! ” she exclaimed warmly. “ What have you been doing to yourself, Ino, that you should feel that ? ”

“ Ah ! ” he said, turning his face away from her, “ *I* have done nothing. That which is within me, is stronger than *I*, that is all.”

“ You are in trouble,” she said very softly. “ What is it, Ino mio ; can I not help you ? ”

All the blood in the young man’s veins seemed to leap up within him at the sound of that caressing word ; and his passion could no longer be repressed. He suddenly turned towards her his glowing face.

“ I have tried to be silent,” he exclaimed, speaking rapidly, and with an utterance that was almost fierce. “ Day by day I have watched you, and I have said to myself : ‘ What right have you to speak to her of love ? You have as yet no money, no position—and she does not know, she does not guess—she only thinks of you as her old playfellow. You are only the child of her mother’s servant ; and she—she is born of the

English aristocracy. You are mad, Raffaello Bartolucci!' But the madness has grown—it has seized me, body and soul, and I am no longer master of myself!"

He ceased as abruptly as he had begun, and turned away, concealing his face with his hand, as he still leant upon the parapet. There was a long pause, while Benedetta slowly collected herself.

Astonishment, fear, and distress had succeeded each other rapidly upon the mobile features as she listened to his passionate declaration. She was utterly taken aback; no suspicion of the truth had, perhaps strangely, as yet entered her mind; and, blended with her intense compassion, came self-reproachings but half-deserved. At length, however, she put her hand out and timidly touched his sleeve.

"Ino," she said, almost in a whisper, "I never knew it. I am grieved—O, am I not grieved for you?"

He dropped his hand, and once more turned towards her, his lips trembling.

"There is no hope?" he asked, searching

her face hungrily. “Ah! I knew it was a madness. You need not pity me. But, O Benedetta mia, I shall love no other to the day of my death.”

“You will forgive me in time,” she said, softly, her own eyes filling as she saw the blanched look on the olive face; “and forget me too, some day, I pray God, dear Ino.”

How was it that she made no pause, that in her heart she felt no doubt as to the answer she must at once give him? Had she not always been fond of him? Had he not a beautiful face, a noble character, and a touch of that genius which raises the individual man upon a pedestal above his fellows? Why was it impossible that she should care for him at some future day, and why did she know instinctively, and wish him to understand, that the feelings of sisterly affection she now entertained for him were unalterable? Surely she was above any vulgar consideration of the lower origin from which he had sprung; nor, surely, had she as yet become so Anglicised as to feel his little foreign ways and Italian mode of

thought as obstacles to sympathy? Certainly, as regarded the former point, no one could say that the young sculptor was not refined in appearance, and polished in behaviour; while as for the other, did not her heart often yearn for the old surroundings—for the old bright, warm Italian life—the sight of the laughing, brown faces, and the sound of the rich, harmonious syllables of her childhood's tongue? Nevertheless, instinct told her what course to pursue; and wisely, woman-like, she followed her instinct unquestioning.

A minute later, and he had raised his head, his face still pale, but a wan smile upon his lips.

“The dream is dreamt and over,” he said, with a calmness that astonished her after his late vehemence. “Come, let us be going home.”

“Tell me first,” she said, hesitatingly, “that you can forgive me—that you are not angry with me?”

“A man is not angry with the flowers of spring,” he said, using one of the similes

common to him, “because he himself has passed into a barren land.”

“If it had but been anyone but you, Ino—you, who have been such a kind, good brother to me—I would sooner have grieved almost anyone else in the world.”

Her eyes were full of tears. It appeared to her so cruel a dispensation, that her hand should be the one to deal a blow to the playmate for whom she had always felt so strong, so loyal an affection.

It almost seemed as if he were comforting her, when next he spoke.

“You could not help yourself,” he said, gently. “Love is not a thing to come by call. He is a winged angel that lights upon the hearts of some, and passes others by. Do not blame yourself. It was my own foolish presumption to think for a moment of you.”

“There was no presumption,” she exclaimed. “Do you remember, Ino, how as a child you used to carry me across the rough stones of the Via Appia, or came to my rescue that day when the masquers

frightened me? How I used to look up to you—how strong and superior I thought you!"

"We were all children then," he said, his face, however, softening with the reminiscences her words recalled, "and you were then the Piccola. Everything," he added in an undertone, "must change as years go on."

"I am not changed?" she asked, almost humbly.

"In heart you will never change. You will always be the same—true and tender—" He paused, but presently added: "And may the man to whom you give yourself some future day be more worthy of you, Benedetta, than I."

"I have no thought of that," she said, quickly.

She felt instinctively that the assurance would be a consolation to him; as indeed it was, although he made no reply in words.

And so they turned to go homewards, walking silently side by side; each feeling sadly that the complexion of things around

them had, in these few moments, changed ; that both sky and river had turned greyer, and that the hurry and bustle on all. sides about them, now seemed far more jarring and discordant than before.



## CHAPTER XV.

### MR. CONWAY REFORMS.

FOR the next few days life went on in much the same round of occupations. There was the usual ride in the morning, the usual drive in the Park or shopping expedition in the afternoon, and the usual public or private entertainment in the evening. Beresford Conway, as a rule, accompanied his cousins when they went out. He spent indeed the greater part of his time lounging in Mrs Wilding's little drawing-room, or attending upon her or her charges at places of public resort. Raffaelino Bartolucci, too, was there almost as much as before. He did not desert the house in consequence of what had passed between himself and Detta; but, after the omission of one day, returned to his former habit of coming in about dusk and making

one of the family party. No change was apparent on the part of either since that episode, unless it were for a little more silence on his side, and a little increase of gentleness on hers. And certainly no one entertained any suspicion of what had occurred unless it were Eveleen, who, as usual on these occasions, kept her own counsel.

After the lapse of a few days, however, an unusual event came to break the routine of what the two girls called their society life. This was a visit paid by them both, under Mr. Conway's chaperonage and at his personal request, to the east end of London. He was a little embarrassed as he made the proposal, and Mrs. Wilding a good deal surprised. He wanted Eveleen's advice, he said, upon some little reforms that were being carried out for the benefit of his tenants, a statement which provoked from the elder lady the ingenuous remark that she had not given him credit before for any particular interest in the benefit of his tenants. Neither did she consider Eva's advice upon such matters of any distinct value. She did not withhold her consent,

however, only warning her girls to avoid, as far as possible—for fear of infectious diseases and the contamination of dirt—coming into personal contact with the people by whom they would be surrounded ; and the trio set off in a hired brougham, Eva curiously amused as to the meaning of this strange new whim, as she deemed it, of her cousin Beresford's ; Mr. Conway himself considerably embarrassed by his novel *rôle* of benefactor, and Detta instinctively recalling the conversation that had passed between herself and him some two or three months before. It was a long drive, and one which led them out of the fashionable thoroughfares they knew so well into others almost equally wide and important, but different indeed in the nature of their population and in the style of their traffic. Out of these again into narrower streets, filled up more or less by hawkers' stalls and costermongers' carts—where the shops all seemed boot-shops, or pawnbrokers' shops, or shops for the sale of old clothes—where half-naked children sat with their feet in the gutters, idle men slouched in knots against the corners

and women with bedraggled hair and slippers down at heel limped down the pavements. Detta had grown very silent the last few minutes, and her eyes were sad and serious as she gazed out of the brougham window, while even Eveleen felt her usual gaiety restrained by the forlorn scenes of poverty on every side.

“I don’t like your property, Beresford,” she said at last. “It gives one the creeps to come here. If I were you I should sell it, and invest my money in something less oppressive.”

“I might have done so, perhaps,” he replied, “had I ever visited it; but I really don’t know that I ever came here until—a—few weeks ago.”

They had now entered a somewhat wider street, and the driver suddenly pulled up and came to the door.

“This is it, I think, sir?” he said, touching his hat.

“Yes, this is it,” said Mr. Conway, proceeding to help his two companions out of the carriage, and rapping sharply at the door in

front of them. In another moment it was opened by a brisk-looking, pleasant-faced woman, who dropped a curtsey to Mr. Conway.

“These ladies have kindly come, Mrs. Jones,” he said, a little nervously, “to see the house and suggest improvements. Will you show us round?”

This Mrs. Jones was only too happy to do, for, extremely proud of the new Coffee Tavern and of her own position of manager was she.

“Well, do you think it will do?” he asked, when at length they had made the tour of the house, with its large well-stocked bar, the nicely-furnished private coffee-room behind, the comfortable reading-room with smaller room containing a bagatelle-table leading out of it; and, at the other side of the passage, a huge apartment filled with benches and platform, and not intended for any particular purpose at present, but where, as Mr. Conway remarked incidentally, “any lecturing fellow approved of by the committee, might have a turn now and then, or where anybody who liked might hold an amateur concert.” This

was about the only remark he made during their passage from room to room, leaving all explanations to Mrs. Jones, who was fully equal to the occasion, and dilated with the eloquent warmth of an enthusiast upon the purpose and advantage of each and every portion of the new building.

“Will it do?” Mr. Conway had asked of his companions. But, whilst speaking, he fixed his eyes upon Benedetta’s face, and it was evident that from her he awaited the reply. He would not, perhaps, have cared for any one to know how much reward lay in the unstinted smile of gratification she turned towards him.

“It is perfect,” she said. “I do not think it could be better, could it, Eva?”

“Cousin Beresford,” said Eva, “you are coming out in a new line. That is the distinguishing characteristic of genius. Its originality is always bursting out under new forms. We shall soon see you chairman of the Woman’s Emancipation League, or walking at the head of the Salvation Army!”

Mr. Conway had forgotten to remove his

gaze from Benedetta's countenance, and when at length he did so, he turned absently towards his cousin, as if scarcely hearing her words; but after a moment he answered her.

"This affair is no charity on my part, you know," he said, with a languid air, "it is—a—or means to be—a self-paying concern."

Eveleen arched her eyebrows incredulously.

"Penny cups of tea and coffee, and penny subscriptions to the reading-room, pay for all this outlay?"

"So they tell me—in time," he replied.

"And you believe them?"

"My dear Eva, I make a point through life, of believing everything I am told. If you doubt, you are required to substantiate your doubts, and that is so much trouble."

"Well," said Eveleen, "in any case I wish it success."

"There is no library as yet, but that is coming, I believe, is it not, Mrs. Jones?" Mr. Conway remarked, referring to his landlady with the air of a man who has not much personally to do with the matter.

"Oh, yes, sir. Indeed, sir, the books as you

ordered came in last evening, and the carpenter he'll be here in the course of the afternoon to commence putting up the book-shelves. And please, sir, while you're here, I may as well tell you about that Mr. Newton, sir. He met my 'usband last night close upon the door-step, and spoke a deal of impudence to him and against you, sir. 'You give Mr. Conway my best respects, Mr. Jones,' says he, 'and just you tell him as I've got a deal a better 'ouse just round the corner of the next street' (which ain't your property, you see, sir), 'and,' says he, 'I finds the situation a deal more 'andy, and 'ope as he won't find me in the way of his grand new lollypop-shop.' And a deal more of such-like imperence, sir, as I needn't repeat to you."

"Who is Mr. Newton?" asked Eveleen, as, after bidding farewell to brisk Mrs. Jones, the party made their way out through the door of the newly-finished Coffee Tavern. "He seems to be a rival of yours, Beresford."

"He was," said Mr. Conway. "He kept a gin-palace nearly opposite this house, and I got rid of him. He ought to be grateful to

me. I gave him a bonus to buy off the remaining year of his lease. But he isn't. There is no such thing as gratitude in this world. He—a—pocketed my bonus, and has transferred himself and his palace a few yards round the corner."

"Have you anything more to show us?" enquired his cousin, as they stood once more in the street.

"Only a pump," he returned deliberately.

"Only a pump!" she echoed laughing.  
"Are you cracked, Beresford?"

Mr. Conway turned towards Benedetta.

"Pumps *were* one of the things, were they not?" he asked. "But I suppose you *might* call it a fountain."

"It is a very neat fountain," said Eva, as they turned a corner and entered a wider street, which was indeed more like a little square, with apparently no thoroughfare leading through it.

"Dogs and horses and cattle all provided for," she continued; "really a very neat design. And what capital troughs!"

"My agent says he can't see his way to the

model lodging houses just yet, Miss Campbell," remarked Mr. Conway. "He is a slow man—a Scotchman—and ideas take time to filter through his brain. But we must see what constant irritation upon the subject will do."

"It will all come in time now that you have begun," she replied softly. "See, here is a grateful little client for your fountain." And she bent down to place the mug attached to the fountain, and which she had filled from one of the jets, within the grasp of a tiny boy, whose stature seemed just too short to admit of his reaching it for himself.

"What is your name, little man?" asked Eveleen, so soon as, with Detta's assistance, he had finished his draught.

"Tom Watkins," answered the small child promptly.

"Do you live in this court?"

"No, down there."

And the grimy little hand was pointed in the direction of a labyrinth of small streets nearly opposite.

"What's your father?" she continued.

“ Ain’t got no father ; he’s gone.”

“ Dead, do you mean ? ”

“ No, gone—runned away. He said as the beaks was after him.”

“ And what does your mother do, since father runned away ? ”

“ She sews.”

“ Sews what ? ”

“ Anythink as the shop will give her.”

“ And you—do you go to school, Tommy ? ”

“ No,” replied the small bundle of rags. “ I don’t go nowheres ; and what’s more,” he added decisively, “ I don’t want to.”

Eveleen and her companions could not help laughing.

“ Wouldn’t you like to learn to read ? ” demanded the former.

“ No, I don’t know as I would. Larning ain’t no particular use, as I knows on.”

“ What *would* you like ? ” inquired Mr. Conway, regarding the small boy with interest.

“ I’d like a tizzy,” he replied without hesitation.

“ Here are two tizzies for you,” said Mr.

Conway dropping a shilling into his eager hand.

“Now,” he continued, “what are you going to do with it? Play pitch and toss, or take it home to mother?”

“Take it home,” replied the child, turning away without a word of thanks.

“Don’t let the street boys see your wealth, or perhaps they might rob you on the way,” remarked Eva.

The little boy looked back, and bestowed a most unmistakeable wink upon the trio.

“I ain’t such a fool as that, quite,” said he.

And opening his mouth, he chucked the shilling into the side of his cheek. Then, without waiting for further parley, he leapt down the steps, and disappeared like an arrow from the bow towards his home.

“How old is that precocious specimen?” asked Eveleen.

“Ten?” said Mr. Conway.

“Six?” said Benedetta.

“He had the stature of four, but the intelligence of ten,” said Eveleen. “I am inclined to think you are nearest the truth, Detta.”

“ Well,” said Mr. Conway, “ if you ladies have now sufficiently admired the pump, we may as well return to the brougham, I suppose. We must not be too long, or cousin Fanny will be sure to imagine us the victims of east-end *russianism*.”

“ Beresford,” said his cousin, before he had finished, “ here is a gentleman who wants to speak to you.”

Mr. Conway turned, and found himself face to face with an elderly man in clerical dress, and with a hard-featured but kindly visage.

“ I am the rector of this parish,” he said, taking off his hat, “ and I want to introduce myself to you. You are, if I mistake not, the Mr. Conway who has a good deal of property here. I wish to thank you for the interest you seem to be taking in various ways for the good of the poor people.”

Something more nearly approaching a blush appeared upon the countenance of Beresford Conway than was often the case with that apparently self-satisfied and nonchalant gentleman.

“ You must thank this lady, not me,” he said, turning towards Detta. “ May I introduce you, Miss Campbell? Also my cousin, Miss Wilding.”

“ My name is Mowbray,” said the clergyman, with a pleasant smile. “ So you are the benefactress?”

“ No, indeed,” replied Benedetta, blushing crimson.

“ Miss Campbell suggested the reforms,” remarked Mr. Conway. “ And others,” he added half aside, with a smile of amusement. “ They would never have been thought of without her.”

“ I thank you both heartily,” said Mr. Mowbray; “ the one for devising, the other for carrying out the improvements. That Reading Room especially will be an immense boon to many of my poor men. I took the liberty yesterday, Mr. Conway, of asking to see the house.”

“ I am very sorry you were not invited before,” replied the other. “ It was an oversight. I had not the pleasure of your acquaintance.”

“ But what I wish most of all to thank you for,” continued Mr. Mowbray, “ is the removal of that awful gin palace from our neighbourhood. They tell me you bought the man out, and of course it will be a financial loss to you.”

“ Oh ! said Beresford hastily, “ that was nothing. But I hear he has only gone into the next street ; so I fear you won’t be much better off.”

“ Oh indeed, he has removed to some little distance, quite out of my way ; and I have besides serious hopes that we may get the place suppressed. The man is as yet only in treaty for the new house, and we, that is the rector of that parish and myself, are meanwhile working upon the magistrates to try to get them to refuse the renewal of the license.”

“ Oh ! I hope you will succeed,” said Benedetta, with an earnestness that came from her heart. She had a keen appreciation for the sorrows and sufferings of the poor, and she had both seen and read enough even in her short young life to realise some of the miseries

attendant upon the existence of these pest-houses.

Mr. Mowbray turned a long glance towards the foreign-looking face, with its great, dark, serious eyes, and the wistful expression which spoke of so much silent sympathy.

“I should like so much,” he said, “if it would not be delaying you too long, to ask you to turn in for a moment and see my Ragged School. It is close by here, and we should find them at work now.”

Mr. Conway glanced towards Benedetta with a smile. “Another of your ideas carried out, you see,” he remarked.

Mr. Mowbray caught both smile and remark. “Oh,” he said, “*that* has been going on for some years. It is one of our best points. What we now chiefly want is improved dwellings for our people. Some of the houses are perfect pig-sties.”

“Model lodging houses come next on the list, I believe,” remarked Mr. Conway, with a return of his half-quizzical manner.

The eyes of the clergyman brightened. “That would be beyond my wildest hopes,”

he said, glancing eagerly towards his companion.

“I see no reason against them.” remarked Mr. Conway. “But my agent, Mr. McClure, does, or fancies he does. You have my full consent to fight it out with him, Mr. Mowbray. He is so accustomed to managing me, that I find it impossible now to manage him.”

“I will tackle him to-morrow morning,” replied the rector, an almost childlike glee expressed in his tone and manner. “But here we are at the school.”

And he led them through a narrow doorway, down a dingy stone passage, from the end of which could be heard the sound of many juvenile voices. Turning through another doorway, they stood in a large stone-floored room, decorated round the walls with gay-coloured prints, and containing some fifty or sixty children of all ages, but chiefly below the age of ten years or so. “After that time,” remarked Mr. Mowbray, “they usually have settled occupations of their own, and it is difficult to catch them to become regular school attendants.”

A little open space was left in the centre of the room, on one side of which were the boys' classes, and on the other the girls'. The teachers were of both sexes, but chiefly young girls, and appeared to be of all ranks. "Of course," said Mr. Mowbray, "they are all unpaid, and do their work for the love of God. And judging from the riot going on," he added, "you would scarcely guess the influence many of them have over their charges."

The noise was indeed deafening, and Eveleen wondered how any teacher could keep his or her head clear enough for the duty required; but it was, after a fashion, legitimate noise, and it was evident that, although the line was stretched to the uttermost, yet that a certain discipline was upheld. If the children screamed, they screamed over their lessons. Each shouted louder than the other, in order merely to outdo his mates; and nothing like rebellion or disrespect was apparent. Altogether, for street Arabs, their behaviour was respectable. The entrance of Mr. Mowbray and his party was the signal for

a general uprising, and a shout of “Good morning, sir,” brought out at the top of several score of voices. The rector spoke a word or two to a few of the teachers, and gazed down upon the small faces upturned to his with unmistakeable love. “They are so sharp and so affectionate,” he said, turning for sympathy to his companions. “Many of them are orphans, poor little souls, or the children of thieves; and some are more than half-starved. But they are always so happy here !”

Both Eveleen and Detta had a natural liking for children, which even the dirt and squalor of these little waifs could not destroy; and their sympathy delighted Mr. Mowbray, whose ragged schools were evidently near his heart. They listened with interest while one or two classes were put forward to display their prowess in the various branches of education; and even Mr. Conway, as he leant against the doorway, an object of amazement and admiration both to teachers and pupils, could not help being amused by the responses of some of these quick-witted, half-naked little street

rovers. "Oh, my! ain't he a swell?" he overheard one boy remark to another, evidently referring to himself; "I guess *he* ain't never buttoned 'is boots for 'issel all 'is life!"

"E's one of them lords as rides in the park every day," returned his companion, "and always 'as a 'arf-crown button'-ole in his weskit."

"I would'nt mind them studs myself, now," remarked a third; "nor yet I would'nt refuse that there gold watch-chain, if 'e was to ax me perlite would I 'ave it."

Neither did the two young ladies escape their share of attention. "They ain't bad 'uns to look at," remarked a small boy not far from Beresford, the number of whose years perhaps might have amounted to seven or eight. "The little 'un with the yaller 'air, is the one for me," he added with the decided glance of a connoisseur.

"She ain't nothing to t'other 'un," said the small boy who sat beside him. "She's a deal finer figger of a woman. The little 'un looks sharp; but lor! the dark 'un, she's that soft

you could turn her round your thumb in no time!"

"Silence!" said Mr. Mowbray to the whole school with energy. And then, very briefly and impressively, he spoke a few religious words, putting his meaning into language which the youngest child could not fail to understand, and applying it practically to their own lives with a vigour and reality that startled his visitors, and seemed to impress his little hearers. Certainly, perhaps none of the three who accompanied him that morning had ever before listened to a teaching at once so simple, so hearty, and so straightforward. There was no doubt about Mr. Mowbray's words coming from his heart. His eyes glowed, and his countenance changed rapidly as he went from theme to theme, fascinating the most irreverent and hardened of the little vagrants by his earnestness. His rugged features were still flushed as he turned half apologetically towards Eveleen. "I fear I have kept you too long," he said; "I always forget everything when I am speaking to my children. You must be going, must you not?"

“ We have been very much interested,” she replied warmly. “ But we must be going now.”

They shook hands cordially. But in the narrow stone passage, Mr. Conway dropped a yard or two behind his companions. He was fumbling with his purse, and now brought a piece of paper out of it. “ Will you accept this?” he asked. “ I am afraid I haven’t been—a—the most exemplary of landlords.”

“ You are too kind,” said Mr. Mowbray, his transparent face expressing the delight he felt. “ What is it for? The school?”

“ Plum pudding for the little beggars—or anything else you like,” returned Mr. Conway; “ I had better leave it to you.” And he escaped down the passage with an unseemly haste most foreign to his usual deliberate mode of progression.









